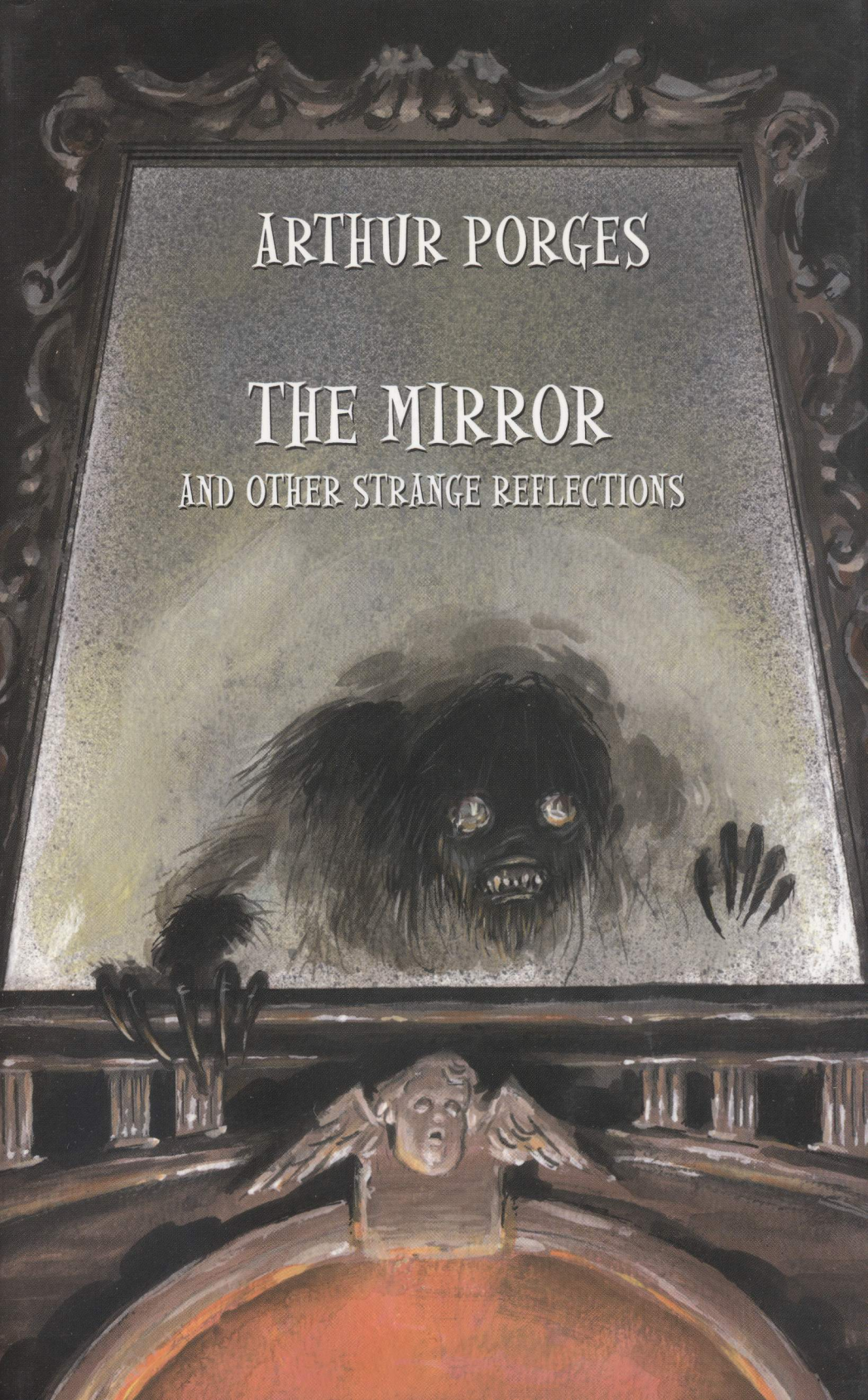
ARTHUR PORGES

THE MIRROR

AND OTHER STRANGE REFLECTIONS



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'Porges is probably the only major writer of the macabre in America not to have had a collection of his work published at any time. I would recommend any publisher in search of a good book of short stories to turn in the direction of Arthur Porges.'

Thus wrote Hugh Lamb in 1977, when he included Arthur Porges' story 'The Man Who Wouldn't Eat' in his anthology *Cold Fear*. By then the author, having published hundreds of stories, had made his name in the fields of fantasy, science fiction, mystery, horror, and the supernatural; yet apart from a collection of Sherlockian parodies, Porges' work had not been gathered together into book form. Now, twenty-five years after Hugh Lamb made his suggestion, a collection of Arthur Porges' weird and supernatural tales at last appears between hard covers.

The Mirror and Other Strange Reflections gathers together twenty-eight tales, ranging from the whimsical to the horrifying. Readers will meet such characters as the Great (though small) God Eep, who can perform any wish as long as the value does not exceed $1.98; Bryce Donaldson, prepared to do anything—or sacrifice anyone—to get what he wants; Redi, one of a dwindling band of shadowsmiths; the sorcerer Don Esteban, who has been met with ingratitude on too many occasions; and the mysterious creature known as the grom, invisible to humans, yet possessed of a sense of mischief which can lead to deadly results.

Porges' work, writes editor Mike Ashley, cannot easily be compared with the work of anyone else in the genre. Readers may detect a hint of Poe here, a little Hodgson there, perhaps a *soupçon* of M. R. James. At the end of the day, however, Arthur Porges' stories stand on their own as elegant exercises in the macabre and terrifying, which will linger in the memory long after the book is closed.

Ash-Tree Press

ARTHUR PORGES was born in Chicago in 1915, and after obtaining a degree in mathematics taught the subject for more than thirty years. A voracious reader, he made his first professional sale as a writer in 1951, and since that time has written hundreds of short stories, which have appeared in such publications as *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Fantastic*, *Argosy*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. In 1988 Magico published his only other collection of tales, *Three Porges Parodies and a Pastiche*. A painter, sculptor, and bird-watcher, Arthur Porges now lives in California.

MIKE ASHLEY, editor, anthologist, historian, biographer, and bibliographer, has been a key figure in the genre of the weird tale for more than three decades. His authoritative biography of Algernon Blackwood, *Starlight Man*, was published in 2001, and he is currently preparing a series of books for Ash-Tree Press which will collect together all of Blackwood's short weird fiction.

Jacket painting by Paul Lowe.

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Arthur Porges

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Edited by Mike Ashley

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Preface

Arthur Porges is one of the great secrets of the world of fantasy and mystery fiction. Apart from the slim volume of his Holmesian spoofs, *Three Porges Parodies and a Pastiche*, published by Magico in 1988, and itself a difficult book to find, he has had nothing collected into book form; certainly none of his fantasy, horror, or science fiction tales. Years ago, his agent advised him that there was no market for short story collections, and so Porges never compiled any.

As a consequence, these stories—and he's written over two hundred—have remained tucked away in various fantasy and men's magazines from the fifties and sixties, read and enjoyed at the time, and seldom forgotten by those who discovered them, but totally unknown to anyone who does not read magazines. A few have appeared in anthologies over the years, mostly his many ingenious crime stories from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, but few of his weird tales have been collected.

The astute Hugh Lamb, who selected two of Porges's stories for his anthologies, remarked twenty-five years ago that Porges 'is probably the only major writer of the macabre in America not to have had a collection of his work published at any time'.

Well, it took another twenty-five years, but at last here it it.

For those not previously acquainted with Porges's work, let me just say this. Porges, who is a mathematician by training and vocation—he taught mathematics for over thirty years—has a surgeon's eye for detail and a mathematician's brain for solving problems. Some fifty years ago, Anthony Boucher, the near legendary editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, called Porges 'the leading exponent of truth in science fiction', and therby lies his strength. Porges is an ideas man. His story will revolve around some little known, but precise, fact upon which he will build to develop it to a natural, but surprising, conclusion. That approach lends itself naturally to mystery fiction and to science fiction,

but it's rare in weird fiction—which means that Porges's work bears little comparison to anyone else's. 'The Mirror' may have some of the atmosphere of a story by M. R. James. So might 'Solomon's Demon', which, Porges recalls, was suggested by one of James's stories. But neither of those stories will prepare you for the sheer uniqueness of 'The Shadowsmith', or 'Puddle', or 'Nightquake'.

Porges's versatility and ingenuity means that he can play umpteen variations on a theme. I can't think of another author who has written so many different stories based on the idea of the 'deal-with-the-devil' or the 'three wishes', and kept them all so surprising. There is a sample included here, but I could almost have filled the book with them.

Porges also has a fascination with fate and destiny. He has long been intrigued by the Greek sisters of Fate and recently told me that he believes that Tyche or Fortuna, the Greek goddess of Chance, really runs our random world. You'll see how Fate weaves its way through people's lives in several of his stories.

But I'm giving too much away here. Mr Porges has kindly written his own introduction for this volume, so I shall hand you over to him and then let the stories speak for themselves.

Mike Ashley
July 2002

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

I sold my first story, 'Modelled in Clay', a dark, end-of-the-world fantasy, in 1951, to a long-gone magazine. I still recall examining the fifty-dollar cheque with wonder and delight. It was not a bad fee then for a few hundred words from a novice writer, but I had no way of knowing that, and didn't even think in terms of money. What really struck home was that somebody was actually willing to pay me for writing.

Even more surprising about that event is that I was thirty-six years old. Why did it take so long? I'd had the basic tools for decades; even in high school my grammar, syntax, and vocabulary were quite good, and I'd already raced through enough excellent authors to tell the best writing from the worst.

No, it wasn't a lack of skill with words that so long delayed my debut, but total ignorance of the requirements that are obvious to professional writers. On those few previous occasions when I'd hopefully sent out a story to some hapless editor, it was badly typed, full of erasures, and I never dreamed of including return postage, assuming that if he liked it—and why not, since it was a story—a cheque would come by return mail.

Even now I have to marvel at my stupidity and all those wasted years.

I had been a voracious reader since my childhood. At ten I was reading, while my mother entertained some friends at a kaffe-klatch, the once famous, mildly salacious novel then causing a sensation, *The Sheik*, by one Edith Maude Hull. When one of my mother's guests identified the book and remonstrated with her, she laughed and said, 'He won't understand it.' She was right, of course. I was fascinated by desert life and camels, and relished the action, but as for the Arab's intentions towards the frigid English girl he had kidnapped—they were far out of my ken.

No writer has influenced me more than Rudyard Kipling. The vigour and drive of his prose are incomparably good and his last short stories, which few know, are powerful, subtle, intricate, and, in every

way, magnificent. I well recall a minor epiphany I experienced in reading one of the *Jungle Books*. Just one line, almost a throwaway. Mowgli, tracking the man-eating tiger, Shere Khan, shouts down into the ravine where the great cat is lying up, gorged. Then Kipling's magic sentence: '"Who calls?" said Shere Khan, and a splendid peacock fluttered up out of the ravine, screeching.' A never-to-be-forgotten snapshot in the glaring tropical sun; my neck hairs must have tingled. I was about sixteen and have been trying ever since to figure out what makes that sentence so effective, and to match it some day.

My life-long fascination with the weird and fantastic may have begun, oddly enough, when I saw an unusual silent movie, *The Road to Yesterday*, in 1925 when I was ten years old. As I vaguely recall, but can't swear to after so long a time, it dealt with a young woman's irrational fear of her most eligible suitor. It was a story about reincarnation, although I didn't know the concept or the word for it; the fellow had been very mean to her in a previous existence. That kind of fantasy was completely new to me, and seems to have made a lasting impression. I gather that the movie is still considered remarkable by film buffs.

But my interest really surged with I discovered Sir Henry Rider Haggard and his sorceress-queen, Ayesha—'She'—an imperious beauty. After that, what a wondrous host. Haggard's tales of Allen Quartermain, the hunter-adventurer, including *Allen and the Holy Flower*, *The Ivory Child*, and *Allen's Wife*, are filled with memorable characters like the grim, cryptic old Zulu witch-doctor Zikali, and Umslopogaas, the fierce giant warrior, wielder of a deadly antique axe. His single-handed defence of a giant stairway in one of the novels is a tour-de-force of action narrative. These are not only splendid hard-edged adventure stories, but have a lot of humour, irony, and wit, and they are impeccably crafted.

Soon I found something even more to my taste—that unique magazine of the thirties, *Weird Tales*. What a treasury of fine stories! There I met the amazing Conan of Robert E. Howard, whose stories virtually glowed with exotic colours and were crammed with bizarre beings, often supernatural, often in mortal combat expertly described. To be sure he was sometimes over the edge with purple prose and awful ichors, but great fun to read.

Needless to say, early on I found Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, still, despite hundreds of challengers, the best of the genre. Its great length and density of detail, even its occasional longeurs, just further empower it. I loved the Lugosi movie, too, and saw it many times. As a teenager, awakening to sex, I would have welcomed that trio of gorgeous vampire girls!

As a born loner and recluse, I never attended writers' conventions, so did not meet any famous authors. My one encounter was with Mick McComas, co-editor for a while, with Tony Boucher, of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He took me to lunch and, naif that I was, I accepted three strong Martinis on an empty stomach. Never much for strong drink, I found my eyes crossing, and I remember little else of that meeting!

So many authors, so many influences. Few today remember W. W. Jacobs, but he's the author of what many call the greatest horror story of all, 'The Monkey's Paw'. And William Hope Hodgson—a superb fantasy writer. His story about a giant supernatural hog is about as scary as they come. And poems—by Poe, and the little known, powerful Beddoes—and perhaps the best of all, Christina Rossetti's dazzling 'The Goblin Market', rife with hidden sexuality. A masterpiece, almost avant-garde, of colour and vitality.

But enough about my reading. You may detect some of these influences in my stories, but really my stories are my own. As a writer I'm fortunate in having a good memory. Every gimmick used in my stories stems from a vast variety of odd facts gleaned from many sources—medical, biological, musical, historical. In a book on archery I read that it's possible to throw an arrow hard enough to kill; no bow is needed. I used that in a story. I read that if a drunk breathes certain dry-cleaning fluids, his lungs fill with the poison gas phosgene. I made use of that. I'm no great shakes with character or human relations, but a master of ingenious gimmicks.

And what about the stories in this collection? If I were to pick the ones I like most, they would be '3rd Sister', 'The Lonesome Game', 'Nightquake', 'Two Lunchdates with Destiny', and 'The Mirror'. Mirrors have always intrigued me and I spent some time devising simple explanations for the oft-asked question as to why a mirror reverses left and right but not up and down. It's very simple, basically, but eludes a simple explanation. But that fascination allows for the apprehension with which we may all approach a mirror.

These stories include many of the best I have written, perhaps the best I'm capable of, although I'm still writing, and even selling a few, at eighty-seven. But maybe I'm not the best to judge, though my distinguished editor and I disagreed on very few. Now it's your turn to judge.

Arthur Porges
July 2002

THE MIRROR
AND OTHER
STRANGE REFLECTIONS

The Mirror

'A MAGNIFICENT OLD HOUSE,' the agent said expansively. 'Just the thing for a large family—with taste. Not one of these ticky-tacky modern cracker boxes with no room to breathe.'

In his heart, Mr Avery agreed completely, but knew he mustn't let his feelings show. Not if a bargain was to be made. So he tried to look shrewd and tightfisted, much as a dormouse might counterfeit ferocity. His was not a poker face; it registered emotions quite similar to those that once flickered in contrasty muggings across the silent screen. He yearned for the huge house, all gingerbread, with its cornices, attics, and above all, the thirty-by-forty foot living-room that boasted a seventeen-foot ceiling and a fireplace big enough for half a redwood tree. And there were ten acres of brushy land, offering wonderful privacy. What a spot for the kids! With five of them, all active, outgoing, creative, and impulsive—just like Dad—finding a suitable house was no simple matter. Yes, this one, almost hidden by towering, leafy oaks was a prize—a lucky stroke.

'It's not bad,' he said cautiously, quite unaware that his soft, brown eyes shone like beacons. 'But, after all, Mr Doss, the place has been shut up for over thirty years, and what with the stories, that would scare most customers off. Everybody isn't as free from superstition as I am, you know.'

'Nothing to all the talk,' the agent assured him. 'The owner just didn't care to rent or sell. He inherited the property at a fairly early age, but never lived there—probably because it was too big for one person alone. That's reasonable enough. One man in a thirty-room house! Of course,' he added quickly, seeing that a question was trembling on Avery's lips, 'it needs some work, but that's why the ad called it a "fixer-upper". A handy man will get a real bargain, whereas if we had to call in regular contractors. . . .'

Mr Avery was not merely a dedicated do-it-yourselfer, he was a

remarkably good one, having a knack for cabinet work, masonry, electrical outlets, and even plumbing. He looked forward with pleasant anticipation to the job of renovating the house. The family could stay in the old one, several hundred miles away, while he toiled in peace, making the nest ready for them. There was no need to consult Lottie; she knew his taste was impeccable and that he definitely headed the family. Mr Avery, in fact, often thought of himself as a modern paterfamilias in the Victorian tradition, and imposed the image rather successfully on his brood.

He and the agent soon agreed on terms, with Doss giving a little, very graciously, and Avery yielding much more than necessary, but feeling no pain, so skilfully was he manipulated.

There followed a period of intense and enjoyable activity on his part, as he began to put the old house in order. There were rotten boards and panels to be replaced; stairs that quivered at even a light tread; wallpaper to be hung; gallons of paint needed inside and out; and furniture, including suitable antiques, to be bought.

Finally, there was the interesting puzzle of the mirror.

This enormous installation was let into the wall above the fireplace, also a giant, intricately carved and decorated. For some reason, the glass had been covered with many brush strokes of heavy, black enamel. After thirty years of drying, the stuff refused to soften even under the most potent chemicals, and Avery was reduced to a kind of slow, tiresome scraping and chipping that made his wrists ache.

He mentioned the mirror to the only man in town who remembered anything about the house, but learned little that was new. Instead the fellow rehashed the story of the murders.

'Nasty business,' the old man said, delighted, obviously, to have a fresh victim. 'Colton had a big family—eight kids—but one was out that night. Anyhow, Colton went nuts and killed all of 'em, and then jumped out an upper window to the flagstones, and he died, too. Son that was out—he come home found them all dead—ones inside all chopped or torn to bits, they say. So horrible the coroner never did talk about it in court. Boy sealed up the house right after. Don't think it was his idea—just a kid. Old Wright, the coroner, he musta told him to. All pretty mysterious. Some think Colton didn't do it—that house is haunted.' He spat. 'Me, I wouldn't live there for a million.'

'Did the coroner have the mirror painted over, too?'

'Dunno about that. Didn't know 'twas done. Painted over, y'say?

Now I did hear once that some of the kids claimed they saw things in it.'

'I've got it pretty well cleaned,' Avery said dryly. 'And it's just a mirror. In fact, my family will love it. I've always wanted one that big over the fireplace. Might even make up some good stories about it.' He winked. 'Stolen, basically, from Lewis Carroll.' The old man looked at him blankly, and Avery coughed. Maybe the guy would recognize a name like *Herzog* or *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, but he wouldn't bet on that either. Probably the sports page was his limit. . . .

As Avery expected, his family was enthusiastic about the house. Even children brought up to be more wordly and cynical would have enjoyed exploring such a pile, with its many fascinating nooks, storerooms, attics, cupboards, and crawl-spaces. Since they ranged in age from five to thirteen, the Avery kids were fully able to make the most of the place. They walked, ran, jumped, and climbed until they knew every inch of the house.

There was only one disappointment: the mirror was still a mess. The lowest layers of paint were particularly resistant; they seemed to have been brushed on to form a grating, with regular horizontal and vertical strokes. In time, of course, Avery would get the glass clear, but for the present, there were more urgent matters requiring his attention. The well, in particular, was acting up in spite of the new electric pump Avery installed; perhaps the casing had a leak. And water was certainly more important than the mirror.

But the time did come, finally, when he could give the glass his full attention, and by using a heavier blade plus a steaming device, Avery removed the last of the black enamel.

Although the mirror was obviously quite old, it gave a clear, undistorted reflection. With his family grouped around a blazing fire, Avery talked, with verve and imagination, about the looking-glass world to be seen—in part—over the mantel. To one side was an archway identical to their own, but they could see only part way into its shadowy depths.

Mr Avery's fancies, which owed so much to Carroll, found an intent audience; even his wife listened. The oldest boy, Larry, more science-minded at thirteen, showed less interest until his father, with shrewd premeditation, raised the question: why are left and right interchanged, but not up and down? That puzzle kept Larry occupied for the rest of the tale.

Janie, who was eight, had a complaint.

'The looking-glass room is just like ours,' she pouted.

'Not really,' her father said. 'See the picture on the wall? In our room, the man's on the left; in there, he's on the right. Besides,' he added quickly, aware that the distinction didn't impress her markedly—how could it at her age?—'we don't know what's in the rest of the house, through the archway and in all the other rooms. They may be altogether different. And the ones who live there stay out of this room which we can see.' He was too perceptive and intelligent to invent any unpleasant tenants; the worst was a fat, elfish creature named Gnolfo, who robbed the refrigerator in the kitchen and could never be seen from this location. Once during the story Avery pretended to glimpse Gnolfo peering through the arch, and Bill verified it, adding rather uneasily, that the elf was small and hairy—but Bill was only five and not held to be a competent witness by his siblings. . . .

It was a charming tableau for a paterfamilias: the five children, all look-alikes in their dark hair and big, brown eyes, but with different temperaments. Janie and Marcia were impish and apt to be challenging, while the three boys were more physical, taking Avery's logic as dependable even when the girls intuitively doubted. And Lottie—she belonged in the picture, too, he felt. Almost a Victorian wife: meek, biddable, sweet, and yet no lightweight mentally. She knew many classics, and played the piano like a concert artist. If only she didn't like Poulenc and some even more wild moderns so much—that didn't fit—yes, he was a lucky fellow to have such a family. Father had been so taken with his first three grandchildren that he'd put a nice sum of money in trust, and now Avery didn't need to do much work as a lawyer—lend the old family name to Winslow, Talcott, and Avery and show up at the office a few hours each week.

'Where does Gnolfo stay?' Brian demanded, standing close to the mirror. He was ten, and mature enough to act as babysitter for his juniors, a job usually ducked by Larry as unworthy of a thirteen-year-old. Both boys were strong and vigorous, and Larry owned a .22, which he could shoot with considerable skill. Any prowler who came looking for trouble while the parents were away might be in for a shock, Avery thought, looking approvingly at Brian's sturdy body and resolute, if rather bovine, eyes.

'Upstairs,' he told his son. 'Not that it's laid out just like ours; I rather think it isn't. But then, we'll never know, will we?'

'Maybe we could get through some time,' Janie suggested half-heartedly. She wasn't at all sure, at eight, that the mirror had another side

facing a different world. Yet older people knew so many things kids hadn't learned yet, how *could* one be sure Daddy was making it up?

'It's possible—some day,' Mr Avery agreed, smiling. 'Alice did, and she was a real girl—Alice Liddell.' And when Larry, expecting this once to catch his father out, scoffed, he was shown, much to his annoyance, the facts in the encyclopaedia. The squelch did wonders for Avery's status; the younger children would now just as soon doubt the next day's sunrise.

'The story will be continued tomorrow,' Mr Avery said at nine-thirty. 'Now it's bedtime, except for Larry; he gets his extra half-hour.'

'Not tomorrow, dear,' Lottie reminded him. 'We're going to the Randalls', remember?'

'I forgot, confound it,' he said, irritated. He enjoyed his role at the fireside, monarch of all he surveyed. The one allotted him in other homes was considerably less exalted, thanks to his dormouse appearance and total lack of interest in modern matters. Then he said crisply: 'Larry will be in charge, and all of you must stay in the house; I don't want anybody outside when there are no neighbours handy like in our old place. Anyhow, we'll be back by midnight. See that they're in bed at the usual time, son. And be there yourself before eleven.'

Neither he nor his wife had any misgivings when they left the following evening. Although the house was isolated to a degree, the heavy doors locked, as did the windows. Larry was a manly fellow, and the .22 could be taken from the closet without his father's permission in an emergency.

After dinner, previously prepared by their mother, the children gathered in the living-room, where a nice fire burned. If they felt reluctant to run about the upper floors while alone, it was perfectly natural. By day the children tended to split up into groups, pairs or even individuals, according to mood or type of play, but at night even a courageous thirteen-year-old had no pressing business in the dark attics above. . . .

'Tell us about the looking-glass rooms,' Bill lisped. 'And the fat little boy with the funny name.'

Larry felt flattered; it was seldom they treated him so like a second father. But he doubted his capacity as a bard.

'Well,' he said uneasily, 'there's not much to tell. It's a whole big house just like ours——'

'Daddy said it isn't,' Janie interrupted.

'I mean it has other rooms, some on the same floor and some

upstairs. But Gnolfo, he likes the kitchen, where the food is.' He did his best from then on, but knew his audience was restive. He had almost lost them completely; only Bill watched the glass, when suddenly the child gave a squeak of dismay.

'I saw something!' Bill cried. 'It was in the arch there.'

'Don't be silly,' Larry said. 'If it was there, it would be in our arch here, too.'

'Why?' Marcia demanded. 'Who said so? That's a different room, actually; Daddy said so.'

'I saw it,' Bill said, his chubby face pale and strained. 'I don't like that—that Nolfy. He's hairy and funny and jumps around . . .'

'Where did he go?' Brian asked.

'He came right into the looking-glass room, and over to the fireplace—*his* ol' fireplace, where you can't see it.'

'Great!' Larry said in a sardonic voice. 'You're the clever one.' He grinned at the others. 'Billy knows we can't prove Gnolfo's not behind the mantel—that's part of the looking-glass room we can't see.' Then his face went blank with thought. 'Wait a minute. If we had another mirror, and moved it back from the fireplace a few feet, and then looked in the big mirror—sure, then we'd see their fire. And that's one even Dad didn't think of!' he added proudly.

'Mom's got a pretty big mirror on her dresser,' Brian said. 'You and me could carry it down here easy, I bet.'

'That's right,' Larry said. 'And that's just what we'll do. You kids wait here, and in a minute you'll see all the rest of the looking-glass room. We'll have some fun with Dad tomorrow, too.'

He and Brian raced up the stairs, too excited to have any fear of the dark landing, and soon returned carrying the dresser mirror, lifted from its gimbals by four strong, eager hands.

They manoeuvred it to the centre of the room, while the other children darted in and out to keep tabs on the reflection. Finally Larry found a spot where, on peering into the bigger one, they could see in the smaller one's reflection, the fireplace of the looking-glass room.

Marcia saw it first, and whimpered; Bill began to scream; and Larry just froze, his eyes pits of horror.

The thing crouching there may have felt the children's collective gaze, for it rose to its full height of some three feet to glare at them. It had teeth and talons and great blank eyes, pitiless as the sun; dark, matted hair covered its body, which rippled continually with a terrible vitality

like that of a centipede. Then it was on the mantel, first on the looking-glass side, and almost immediately on theirs . . .

When the Averys came into the house at eleven-forty and saw the living-room, Lottie began to scream—shrill, toneless, repetitive notes that sounded like mechanical whistles. She kept them up for hours, even under heavy doses of morphine, and was silent only in death, two days later.

Mr Avery looked at the remains of his children, and knew that all but one were dead. Janie's eyes showed that she was still alive, but they also held a wordless plea, as if she understood what was best; and her father, without knowing why, did what had to be done, giving the child release. Only then did he begin to whimper in a high, quavering voice nothing like his normal rich baritone. Later, he was indicted for murder, but a vegetable cares little about such things. . . .

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What Crouches in the Deep

FIFTEEN HUNDRED FATHOMS down, the water was liquid darkness, the ocean floor chill, grey ooze. On broad caterpillar treads, Steve Driscoll's submersible ploughed steadily forward in a cloud of silt, up out of the depths, its powerful twin engines rumbling.

The man rechecked the control panel, a pleased smile on his angular, good-humoured face. Right on course. Somewhere—straight ahead, with luck—on the farther edge of this great undersea valley he was leaving, the submarine U-458 lay in sixty fathoms with its cargo of dead—and seventy million dollars in gold and gems.

Fifty-three years earlier, just before V-E Day, the submarine, transporting a dozen top Nazis and a choice selection of Europe's most portable loot, had left Germany bound for sanctuary in South America. But halfway in their desperate flight, the U-458 had been spotted by a lumbering patrol plane, a clumsy workhorse of the air. Even as the hostilities ground to a bloody halt in Berlin, the plane's bombs sent the submarine plunging to the bottom.

There was only one survivor, a seaman left on deck when the U-458 crash-dived in vain. He told his interrogators of gold bars, sacks of currency, and priceless artwork. Eyes shining, he spoke of a big wooden case which had split during the loading to spill a glittering cascade of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

Recalling the seaman's testimony in old, crumbling newspapers, and his own researches in the voluminous records of World War II, Steve smiled a little grimly.

The metal detector buzzed, an imperious tone, and his pulse leaped. He was now out of the deep, the meter reading only sixty-three fathoms, and something shadowy was visible just ahead. Steve gave a little grunt of satisfaction; for the object, starkly clear in the probing beam, was a submarine lying on the dark ooze, her sleek lines almost completely obliterated by a half-century's fine marine growth. The ship

was resting almost upright, too, with conning tower vertical, he noted. A helpful circumstance, although not vital to the operation of his versatile machine.

But it was necessary to make sure of her identity; after all, more than one U-boat had taken its last dive in these waters. Systematically, the submersible prowled its find. Finally Steve's spotlight centred on the painted symbols, rusty and weed-obscured, but still legible. This was definitely the U-458, with its seventy millions. Except for that narrow, ragged tear in her stern, the ship seemed little damaged. Evidently she had been ready to dive when bombed, for her deck was clear, and the hatches dogged shut.

Steve brought his submersible alongside, and studying a copy of the U-boat's plans, selected a point on the hull of the crew's quarters. He tugged at a lever, started an electric motor, and seized a control stick not unlike that of a light plane. A quarter-inch tubular drill tipped with boron carbide thrust from the submersible's bow to press against the U-458. As the motor hummed, Steve shoved the lever forward, and the hollow probe pierced the wreck's double hull like a mosquito's sting entering human skin. When the racing bit told him he was through, Steve cautiously twisted a valve handle, only to wrench it tight again as a needle of icy water under the heavy pressure of sixty fathoms jetted into the little craft.

'Crew's quarters flooded, all right,' Steve murmured. 'Let's try the control room.'

Again the sampling drill stabbed the submarine's steel skin. This time, when he cracked open the valve, there was a rush of fetid gas: cold, devitalized, loathsome. Grimacing, he diverted some of it into the analyzer. There was only a trace of oxygen; almost seven per cent—a fatal concentration—was carbon dioxide; and the nitrogen which comprised the main volume was heavily contaminated with organic compounds. It was easy to tell that men had died in that compartment.

'Wonder where the loot is?' Steve speculated aloud. 'If the survivor said anything about that, it sure isn't on record. My guess would be they loaded it in place of the torpedoes, since they didn't plan to do any shooting. On the other hand, without a full crew, almost any compart—' He stopped, his eyes widening incredulously. Ringing with crisp clarity through the adjoining wreck were three metallic clangs, as if someone were pounding on the hull.

'What the hell!' he exclaimed. Then he laughed, a little shakily. 'Gave me quite a jolt there for a second. Some of the U-boat's gear must be

hammering her side when there's a bit of current.' He paused, reflecting. There hadn't been a thing dangling on the submarine that he could recall from his circuit of her; and at this depth the water was seldom in motion.

The sound came again: three staccato raps, strong and insistent. Little beads of moisture sprang on his tanned forehead. 'Don't tell me some joker's got to the gold first!' he gritted between set teeth. 'I must be hearing things, for sure.'

Moving with feverish haste, his face dark, he manipulated the controls of his sonophone. Four times its intense, ultra high frequency pulsations made frothy cavities in the inky water. Instantly came the urgent-sounding response: four taps from inside the sunken U-boat.

With fingers that shook, Driscoll signalled in international Morse: 'Who are you?' He waited, tense and puzzled. It just didn't seem possible that any other diver could have forestalled him. Nobody else in the world had a ship like his. The Bell-Weinberg two-man submersible, on which this one was modelled, failed miserably below fifty fathoms. And if a man went down in one of those self-contained, heavy-armour jobs, he certainly couldn't make it through that narrow slash in the stern. Skin divers? Fantastic. Not at this depth, in these frigid waters. No air hose in sight, either; and no conventional outfit would sustain a man for more than a few minutes at sixty fathoms. No, it was some crazy mistake. Something banging on the ship's hull. All the answer he'd get to his message would be those meaningless raps.

Then he stiffened, his jaw dropping. Slowly, but in comprehensible Morse, came the words: 'Trapped inside control room. Help.'

Although his brain throbbed to unanswered—seemingly unanswerable—questions, Steve replied as any good seafarer must. Nothing has precedence over saving life, and few sailors bother about the risks. Steve would act in the tradition of centuries. He signalled with unhesitating assurance: 'Coming into sub. Stand clear of starboard side.'

This time the big drill used for entrance and salvage came into play. Eighteen inches in diameter, its whirling, diamond-studded rim gnawed into the rusty metal like a mouse into soft wood. As Steve was adjusting the inner airlock, he heard the double mouthful of corroded metal ejected by the drill, and the sucking sound of silicoid packing making the junction watertight. A twinkle of approval lit his blue eyes; everything was working by the book. A sweet ship! Even after all this time.

He pressed a button, and the low pressure pumps began to empty the tube which now joined the two submarine craft in an eighteen-

inch, ten-foot long, hollow cylinder. When the pumps stopped, indicating a dry connection, Steve put on his mechanical lung, opened the inner hatch, entered, closing it behind him, and crawled down the wet tube. At the outer lock, he paused, oddly reluctant. By opening the steel port before him, he could scramble into the U-458. Yet somehow he hated to do it. Somewhere in his brain a tiny alarm bell rang an insistent warning. He had to fight an almost overwhelming impulse to return to the submersible, break the contact, and get out of there—fast. Then he set his jaw. Hell, he thought; it's that fey Irish mother coming out in me. He couldn't leave a fellow human trapped in the sub, not even in these peculiar circumstances. A guy couldn't sleep nights. Besides, what was there to be afraid of? With a shrug, Steve opened the hatch, and holding his powerful flashlight straight ahead, wriggled down into the control room of the U-458.

He swung the beam in a searching motion. What he saw made him gasp. There, directly in its glare, incredibly cadaverous, sunken eyes dilated, stood a tall man, wearing a faded, mildewed uniform of the Death's Head Hussars, elite corps of the notorious SS troops.

The white, granulated lips moved, and in a thin, hollow voice, dry and passionless as the rustle of dead leaves, the apparition said: 'Colonel-General Werner Diekmann.' The mouth twisted in a travesty of a smile. 'Welcome to the U-458.'

As the flashlight shook in his trembling hand, Steve thought for a moment that the submarine itself rocked, about to break free of the tenacious silt. Then he rallied, steadying the beam, as Diekmann spoke again.

'Can you get me out of here?'

Driscoll gaped at him, unable to phrase a reply. The whole situation numbed his normally quick mind. Where had he heard the name 'Diekmann'? It was damnably familiar, and in no pleasant connotation. Then he remembered the survivor's list of distinguished passengers, given in the newspapers of 1945, Colonel-General Werner Diekmann—of course! He was high on the list. But that was impossible, fantastic. The man would be ninety, and except for his emaciation, this fellow was a vigorous fifty at most. Good God! Even now there was no oxygen in the compartment, only a stale effluvium that would gag a buzzard.

'Diekmann,' he repeated thickly through his mask. Then, as another memory returned: 'Warsaw'.

The ruddy, hollow eyes, unblinking in the pitiless light, held a faint

internal gleam. 'You have heard of me,' the general said in that uncanny, soughing voice.

'Yes,' Steve whispered. Then, spreading the fingers of his right hand in a gesture of bewilderment: 'But—but—my God, General, you—fifty years in a tomb like this—fifty years! And, damn it, you're not old enough!' Protest sharpened his voice. 'I don't believe it; I won't believe it. It's insane.' Diekmann watched him stonily, and Steve blurted: 'How did you live—and breathe?'

'It's not so impossible as all that,' the other replied. He seemed to hesitate, then said slowly: 'I was torpid much of the time, like a hibernating animal. Then, too—but I cannot explain. There are many mysteries in the world. Besides, explanations can wait. Let us get out of here. Come, man, let us go.'

He stepped to the airlock, his whole lean body alive with eager, preternatural energy. Steve turned, putting the light beam on him again, and in the glare Diekmann's deep-set eyes shone like those of a great carnivore.

Driscoll looked at him steadily, stifling his aversion. After all, whatever his crimes, fifty years in this hulk were punishment to satisfy the most vengeful. Yet there was the treasure, too. His life savings were tied up in the submersible, and there were plenty of creditors waiting on the surface. If he came up empty-handed, they'd take his ship. Sure, it was tough on Diekmann to delay, but it wouldn't be for long.

'The gold and jewels,' he said stiffly. 'If you don't mind, General, I'll help myself before we move out.' He added, almost in apology: 'This is my first chance to clean up a valuable wreck.' Immediately he felt furiously angry with himself. Why apologize to this murderer about the treasure? It wasn't his. It belonged to a bunch of poor devils long since dead.

'Gold,' Diekmann whispered. 'Ah, of course. So that's why you're here. Yes, but you see, the torpedo room is flooded. Hopeless, is it not? Sixty fathoms, I believe. If we had only stored it here——'

'Don't you believe it,' Steve protested. 'You don't know what a sweet outfit I have. It's made to order for wrecks, flooded or not. I'll just climb back into my ship and tear that torpedo room wide open.'

'I'll go with you,' the general said.

'I was thinking you'd better wait until——'

'No!' The disembodied voice was peremptory. 'I'll come along.'

'It will be too crowded for working,' Driscoll objected. 'I know how

you feel, but it won't take more than an hour, and if I go back without any gold, they'll steal my ship from me.'

'I come!' The gaunt, grotesque figure stood squarely before the exit, great, wire-muscled hands working convulsively. 'Do you take me for a lump—a fool? You're here for gold; you confess it. Who would be stupid enough to take a man instead of more treasure?'

'If you think I'd abandon anybody down here for a few more dollars,' Steve flared, 'you're batty!' Bitterly, he added: 'Don't try to saddle me with your own filthy Nazi tactics.'

The general eyed him, his dead-white face immobile. 'Spare me the lecture,' he said. 'You're not getting out of here alone.' His towering body seemed to ripple with nervous undulations like that of a giant centipede; but Steve noticed with horror that his chest did not rise or fall to any breathing. Stepping back, he studied the menacing figure before him with new understanding. It came to him that his hunch about the U-boat was correct. Yet how could he have dreamed of encountering anything like this? He knew now, with dreadful certainty, what Diekmann was.

Crouching a little, he gritted: 'Nothing human could have lived here, in this steel coffin, fifty years. Even now, there's no air—and you are not breathing.' A nervous hum appeared in his voice. 'What kind of a monster are you?'

'Very well,' Diekmann said coolly. 'Why pretend? Of course, I'm obviously not human, as you understand the term. Nevertheless, I want to get back—to the surface.'

'No!' Steve's jaw muscles knotted. 'Damned if I will! To turn a thing like you loose again——'

'I warn you,' the general broke in, his hoarse whisper charged with a kind of soulless ferocity, 'if I stay here, it won't be alone.'

For a heartbeat Steve hesitated, weighing Diekmann's threat. Then, without a word, he sprang, one big fist smashing hard against the other's lantern jaw. There was two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind the savage blow, but to his chagrin, this Sunday punch was absorbed without a blink. Then iron fingers gripped his wrist with a force that made him wince.

'That was foolish,' the general told him. 'If I were to pull off your mask——' Steve writhed desperately in the relentless clutch. 'Don't worry,' Diekmann reassured him ironically. 'I need you to get me out of here. A gentlemen's agreement, yes?' He released Steve's wrists, and

tight-lipped, the man massaged them. The general's strength, too, was more than human.

'Okay,' Steve submitted. He moved towards the air-lock, but Diekmann shook his head. 'All right,' Driscoll snapped. 'You go first, then.' Immediately Diekmann began squirming through the port. The man followed, and when the general reached the inner lock, called directions for opening it. In a few minutes they stood together in the submersible, Steve seething with homicidal rage, his passenger evilly alert.

Pulling off his mask, Steve swung the inner hatch shut, and curtly showed Diekmann where to hunch himself on a gear-box well clear of the controls. Even so, it was crowded.

'Now, if you don't mind,' Steve said, his voice heavily sarcastic, 'I'll grab some of the treasure before we start up.'

'By all means,' was the smooth reply. 'I can use——' He broke off, but Steve easily completed the thought. He had no illusions about the present situation. It was a desperate one for him. Obviously, once they reached the surface, Diekmann would kill him, take a good fistful of loot—probably some of the fabulous gems—sink the submersible near land, dump the uniform, and pretend to be a shipwrecked sailor. All that kept him from doing the job now was his need of Driscoll's technical knowledge. No, Steve thought, there was only one out for him: he must destroy the general first.

But how could that be done? There wasn't even a gun on board, and he doubted if one would be of much use. It was very unlikely that a single shot could kill anything with Diekmann's superhuman vitality; and once those incredible paws found him, no second shot would be possible. No, killing this creature would not be easy; it would have to be a remarkably thorough job, like scotching a snake. Even now, the red, cavernous eyes, cold-lit, watched his every motion. The general had graduated from one of the toughest, most ruthless schools of modern times—and reached the top in a world of trained killers.

Suddenly Diekmann began to breath in short, stertorous gasps. Steve's skin crawled. The general was already preparing himself to pass again as human, up there on the surface. Stern-faced, Driscoll put him out of his thoughts, and turned to the task in hand.

There was a sucking thud as they tore free from the U-458. Steve heard the clanging shriek of tortured steel ripping as the rush of high pressure water through the eighteen inch hole collapsed the bulkhead

between the crew's quarters and the engine room. No doubt every major compartment was now flooded.

Moving with a practised efficiency acquired by many hours of rehearsal in shallow water, Steve prepared to crash the torpedo room. This time he drilled a series of small holes in a roughly rectangular pattern, and then used the hydraulic nippers. The high-power claws, resembling those of a huge lobster, tore away the plating like wet paper, laying the compartment wide open. He tooled the submersible's nose into the gap, and snapped on the searchlight. There in the penetrating glow, Steve saw a tumbled mass of boxes, bales, sacks, and canisters, all covered by roiled water. Most of the containers were rotted; he could see pulpy remnants of paper money swirling about; and one wooden box spilled a stream of gold coins.

Using a remote control grab-bucket, Steve went to work, dumping the desirable items into the open cargo channel, not unlike a king-size rain gutter, which made a capacious belt around the submersible. Once a rotten sack burst open, spilling a great pile of tooth-fillings, and Steve felt his stomach churn. Gold was gold, but this kind he didn't care to take; the aura of evil was still too strong after half a century. As far as he was concerned, that part of the treasure could stay on the sea bottom until that far off day when the sun would explode and the oceans boil away.

While he worked, ever conscious of the silent, watchful Diekmann just behind him, Driscoll's mind was frantically active. In a moment he'd have all the stuff he could carry; in fact, with the unwelcome passenger, he'd have just enough buoyancy to get topside. And he couldn't think of a thing, except to stall a bit longer. But the general was shifting impatiently now, and if he waited too long, Diekmann might figure out for himself the fairly simple routine for surfacing. And then . . .

Steve thought hungrily of Diekmann shot to bits by a heavy calibre rifle; of Diekmann smashed with an iron club; of Diekmann crushed by a hundred fathoms of icy water—then his mind snapped to attention as a thought came to him with electrifying intensity. Who wrote that book? A pioneer oceanographer. Beebe, of course. William Beebe.

Steve's anxious eyes swept the control panel. It might work, but not here. Meanwhile he'd better cook up a plausible story. . . .

Without a word of explanation to Diekmann, he backed the submersible's bow out of the torpedo room, stowed the loading gear, and gave the craft full throttle. The twin engines roared as the sturdy

ship moved back the way it had come—into the eighty-mile-long trench that slashed the ocean floor like a cosmic sabre cut.

For some moments the general seemed indifferent to the downward motion, but finally he said in his harsh, bodiless murmur: 'Why are you not ascending?'

Glibly Steve recited his prepared explanation, counting fervently upon Diekmann's ignorance of submarine techniques.

'I have to go down first,' he said. 'My ship is designed to make the sea itself work for me. By dropping to a thousand fathoms or so, I let the water compress air, which is then used at shallower depths to pump my ballast tanks dry. It saves the motors from unnecessary strain.'

The general said nothing, but shifted restlessly, his eyes wary. Stealing an occasional glance, Steve saw him settle back finally to a more relaxed position. Evidently he felt that there was no serious mischief within the man's power so long as they were jammed together in the small control room. With an inward sigh of profound relief, Steve drove the submersible deeper into the abyss.

Gradually, as they lurched along at a steady twenty-three knots, the fathometer needle swung clockwise. Steve watched it gravely; he had never taken the ship to its limiting depth, and was now determined to do so. Five hundred fathoms, eight hundred, one thousand—twelve hundred. At eighteen hundred fathoms—over two miles down—the tough hull of the little craft creaked a warning. It was time to act.

A casual glance over one shoulder told Steve that Diekmann was still crouched, observant, but not excessively tense, in the same position. Even so, this was going to be mighty ticklish, requiring flawless judgment of direction as well as timing. Making fussy dabs at various controls, Steve unobtrusively lined up the sample drill, pivoting it on the stiff universal joint at the instrument panel. A final peek at the general, another tiny nudge at the drill's opening, and he was ready.

With an inward prayer, Steve put his hand on the valve. A swift, ninety degree rotation, and through the quarter-inch tube, open momentarily to the sea, there screamed a wire-thin rod of frigid water, stiffer than a steel bar, more penetrating than the sharpest dagger—water squeezed into a terrible slicing machine by eighteen hundred fathoms of incompressible liquid mass bearing down upon it with a weight that makes the very floor of the ocean creep.

A single lightning flick of his hand, and Steve slapped the hissing jet in an eight-inch horizontal sweep, right across Diekmann's neck.

There was an indescribable groan, and something heavy fell to the

deck. Closing the valve, Steve whirled with an exultant cry just as the headless general, standing erect and bloodless, seized his throat in a crushing grasp. For a grim, eternal instant, the bony fingers sank deep, and Driscoll clawed frantically at Diekmann's wrists, his eyes bulging, his consciousness leaving him. Then the terrible grip relaxed briefly, and Steve tore free, panting.

Groping blindly, the decapitated monster stumbled over some gear, and fell. It lay in a squirming, tossing heap, lashing out with hooked fingers. Finally the more violent spasms subsided, although there were still minor shivers. But comparatively quiet as the thing was, Steve had an overmastering fear of touching it. He had a hunch that Diekmann's incredible vitality was not yet spent. Obviously he was dealing with something of the vampire or werewolf order, a being partially immune to nature's laws. It had been a close call just then; his throat was stiff and painful.

Warily, Steve opened the airlock, arching his body to avoid the twitching torso. When he took the head, very gingerly, by its matted hair, the eyes fluttered and the raddled lips moved soundlessly. Nauseated, Steve hurled the thing into the tube, where it bumped to a stop against the massive outer hatch. He could hear its teeth grating, and his neck hairs prickled.

Nerving himself, he took hold of one ankle, but the general's body snapped to a sitting position, and Driscoll shrank back, white-lipped. He stood there dazed, staring about. There wasn't much time to lose; the thing seemed to be recovering its muscular coordination. He thought he had won the war with that jet; but apparently only a battle.

Suddenly his eyes lit up, as he remembered the equipment for jettisoning heavy objects. Skirting Diekmann's fumbling hands, Steve reached into a recess of the airlock, unreeling a steel cable fitted with a snap hook. The uniform? No; that rotten cloth would never hold. What then?

He thrust a tentative toe forward, nudging the general's ankle. Instantly the torso jerked to a sitting position, while the big hands made eager snatches. But the moment Diekmann's shoulders left the oily deck, Steve whipped a loop of cable about the lean waist, caught the flying hook, and in a single deft motion locked it to make a steel slip noose.

Without a moment's pause, Driscoll sprang to the control board, jabbing a button. Diekmann's hands were already fumbling with the fastening; in a matter of seconds he might solve its simple mechanism.

But the motor was throbbing, and the cable, drawing tight, slid the steel noose up under the general's arms. Now he could no long remove it without difficulty. Slowly the struggling body approached the gaping air-lock and vanished into the tube.

Immediately Steve kicked the inner hatch shut, and dogged it tight. Then he took a deep breath, a look of unholy anticipation transfiguring his haggard features.

'Diekmann,' he grated, 'here's where you get yours!'

And he opened the outer lock, with the headless body still thrashing wildly in the tube, to eighteen hundred fathoms of sea.

There was a sound as if a giant insect had been squashed beneath a titanic boot. Then—silence.

When he reached the surface, half an hour later, the sun was shining on placid blue water. Steve put his head against the control panel, shutting his eyes and letting the warm sunlight caress his back. Then he sat erect, studied his instruments, and set a course for land.

Solomon's Demon

THERE WAS NO DOUBT that the old house had an aura of evil, but Barry Selden never believed for a moment that it was actually haunted. Such things might be all very well in England or the wilds of Dracula's Transylvania—assuming that the Reds would tolerate any supernatural deviationists—but not in New England. Besides, even his uncle had not mentioned any ghosts; he had merely made obscure implications through the will. Obviously George Kaelin had wasted a good property in permitting this fine old place to lie vacant for fifty years. Imagine a house these days, and in a good tourist area, too, with high rents, lacking electricity. A crowning irony, since just beyond the north fence the great steel towers marched across the fields shouldering high tension wires. And nothing in the building but rusty kerosene lamps.

Well, the estate was Selden's now. Uncle George, in the will, had urged him neither to live there nor to sell out. He even objected, it would seem, to tearing the house down and putting up a more modern one, although the land and location were quite valuable, protected from neighbours by a good buffering of scenic meadow. The old man had been maddeningly vague, hinting at some evil secret hidden in the basement, something it would be dangerous to disturb. The fellow was surely a kook.

And yet, from the moment he'd moved in, with a view to preparing the place for his wife, Selden had been uneasy; no, he might as well admit it—scared. For the first time in years, he kept a light burning in his room all night. And surely it was significant that he'd picked the one farthest from that damp, dark basement. For a week now, he'd been exploring the house, making plans for remodelling, but still avoiding a detailed inspection of the cellar. But he couldn't delay much longer and keep his self-respect. There were some interesting old trunks down there that suggested the possibility of valuable antiques. If so, they might pay

for modernizing the house. Today, therefore, it must be done. He would take one of the gasoline lamps—he'd brought two—down there, and look around. Then, when Valerie arrived, on Monday, they could make decisions.

Immediately after lunch—luckily he'd been able to get a little butane stove in town—he began. It was fascinating to search the boxes and bales. Most of the clothing was hopelessly mouldy; but there were other items, some of them real treasures: books, including a couple of good Melvilles; some valuable glass; and a box of superb scrimshaw work in whalebone, ivory, and assorted teeth. At the sight of it, Selden recalled that Uncle George's grandfather, who built the house, had been a whaler, as well as a blackbirder, in the 1840s.

The scrimshaw work—delicate, ingenious carvings—was of excellent quality and great artistic merit, worth hundreds of dollars. After all, each piece meant weeks of painstaking work on the part of some whaler with too much time on his hands between kills. Selden gloated over the stuff. This item he would keep; it was too nice to sell; that one, too, would hold Val's jewellery . . .

At the very bottom of the box, wrapped in musty canvas, he found something else. Just a plate of yellowed ivory, perhaps four by five inches, cut, apparently, from a single huge elephant's tusk. At the sight of it, he sucked in his breath.

Selden was familiar with many masterpieces of the grotesque, including those of the brilliant German school, but this displayed a primitive power beyond his experience, even though the artist must have been an illiterate seaman with only a sheathknife as an engraving tool.

The carving depicted a scene of nightmare context on the deck of a ship. One man, presumably the captain, from his dress, was cringing against the rail with an expression of sick disbelief on his face. He was holding a small black box, the size of a brick. Before him, a sailor lay dead. He appeared to have been a giant of herculean build, perhaps cock of the fo'c'stle, yet one of his arms had been torn off at the shoulder, and his face was a shapeless ruin of mangled flesh.

Three other men were engaged in a gallant but obviously hopeless fight with a most appalling monster. It was tall, much taller than the biggest sailor, cadaverously thin, and fearfully banded with wire-like muscles. One huge taloned paw still clutched the red rags of the dead man's face; the other was cramming the end of the severed arm into the

gaping mouth. The creature wore a sort of tattered grey robe, through which its pale skin, sparsely dotted with green hair, gleamed obscenely.

Worst of all were the eyes, yellow and without pupils. They shone with unquenchable hatred, and their intelligence was beastlike, rather than human, in their animal lack of restraint.

The thing was earless, and had only a single moist pit for a nose, but its mouth was a jungle of teeth like great glass splinters, running far back into the mighty jaws.

The carving was carefully coloured, and seemed to Selden to have a vitality beyond any mere fantasy. The scene it recorded could not have happened, except in the sick mind of the artist, and yet, in the clammy cellar, with the gas lamp hissing, and no other humans within earshot, he began to shake as if agued. And suddenly, unable to resist the irrational panic, he seized the lamp, and, plaque in his other hand, bolted.

Upstairs, in the more reassuring atmosphere of his room, and bolstered by two stiff martinis, he found himself more calm, and able to examine the carving further. His first impulse was to rationalize the monster's physical proportions. No doubt the artist, as a slave catcher, could have seen a gorilla. This conception was probably based on such a brute. You could make the big ape taller, modify its head, give it a remnant of clothing to intensify the horror of its pseudo-humanity . . . But Selden couldn't convince himself. Actually, there was no resemblance to any of the large primates, except in strength.

Defeated in this line of speculation, Selden casually flipped the ivory from one hand to the other. The moment he saw the reverse of it, enlightenment came, for there, on the back, was a neatly carved inscription. Except for some misspellings, it read:

> The encounter of the men of the *Sarah Hackett* with a malignant spirit of the Night. How an evil demon, sealed up since the days of Solomon, was accidentally released by Captain Barker. It tore off the face and right arm of First Mate Ezekiel Sharpe, and then daunted by the light, which it cannot abide, retreated below decks. It was driven back into the box by the Voodoo Priestess, Mamaloi Hannah, who was freed as a reward. June, 1841.

Selden shook his head wonderingly. The unknown artist had gone to great lengths to make this appear the record of a true occurrence. Yet the world of 1840, like that of 1961, had no place for evil spirits bottled up by Solomon. Obviously, nothing like this had ever really happened. Yet

beneath his rational scepticism there was the stirring of vague instinctive fears; he recalled the reputation of the old house, and the cellar with its air of brooding menace.

Once more he scrutinzed the bit of ivory, and this time, on one edge, in a barely visible scratching in a different hand, he made out the cryptic words: 'Sealed Trap'.

In his mood of sharpened awareness, the implication seemed clear. Another clue to this fantastic affair had been carefully concealed, undoubtedly by Barker himself. There was a trapdoor, and it must lead to more documentation. Selden knew that he must pursue the matter further. Only a complete investigation could remove the stigma from the house. Once the facts were established, reason would prevail, and he need no longer feel childish fears in the cellar.

But it was getting quite dark now; and when he thought of returning to the basement, his nerve began to fail him. Why not wait until morning? There wasn't any hurry; Val wasn't due until late afternoon. But self contempt for his cowardice was prodding him into action. He was no baby to be frightened of a cellar. An excellent middleweight boxer, college champion on the horizontal bars, veteran of Korea—hadn't he fought down panic before? Yet even as he told himself this, he knew, too, that each man has something he fears above all else, fire, or snakes, or dying of cancer. There was no shame in such a weakness; it was part of being human. Why, even the imaginary monster of the picture ran from light.

Finally curiosity and shame triumphed over deeper instincts. He took one gas lamp, leaving the second burning in his room—the only illumination in the big house—and went back down. Once in the cellar, he put the lantern on an old highboy, so that it cast a cheery golden pool over most of the room, and began a systematic search for a hidden trapdoor.

The floor was covered with the dust of decades, but he found a tattered broom and swept away at all the open spaces. The solid masonry looked as if it hadn't been touched since having been laid down over a century earlier.

Having drawn a blank from that phase of the hunt, there was nothing left but to shift some of the boxes and trunks. Perhaps the trap was under one of them. So grunting and sweating, he shouldered them aside, one after the other. Still not a single suspicious outline anywhere on the floor.

'One more,' he thought. 'I'll do just one more, then give it up for tonight.'

Even as he told himself this, the quest was over. Pushed by his shoulder, a big trunk grated away from the wall, and there, not in the floor at all, but well above it, was a small wooden door, heavily studded with thick nails.

Filled with impatience, Selden found a pry bar and attacked the stubborn oak. It took twenty minutes, but at last the door swung free. He reached in, found his hand touching something, and pulled it out. At the sight of it, he felt his stomach contract like a clenched fist, spurting sourness up into his throat.

In his hand was a small black box, identical with the one in the carving.

Trembling with emotion, he carried it to a rickety table, and then brought the lamp over. Under its steady light he examined his find. The box was made of some exotic, highly polished wood, and had a lid equipped with heavy hinges of corroded bronze. To his surprise, the only lock was a necklace of vertebrae strung on coarse black hairs, and fastened with a little skin bag. The latter suggested something familiar, and abruptly Selden placed it: a *ouanga* of the sort common to voodoo rituals.

He stood there, box in one hand, thinking hard. Here was a decision to be made, and he was a little ashamed about hesitating. He ought to open the box, and so purge his mind of those irrational fears. But he could still see the captain standing there, sick and appalled by what came out of the little container. There was nothing to lose by waiting. Maybe in the light, with a good rifle, and an anthropologist learned in voodoo matters . . .

At that moment, something stirred inside. It was an experience to break anybody's nerve, and Selden's went. The box slipped from his palsied fingers. It hit the shaky little table hard; a weak leg splintered, and the lantern shattered on the stone floor. Instantly the cellar was pitch black.

Completely panicked now, Selden ran for the door. Behind him there was a faint scuffling, and when he turned for one horrified glance, he thought he saw a tall figure with opalescent eyes rising from the box.

It was then that he made a critical error in tactics. Instead of running for the back door, to open fields, and help, he took the nearest route—the staircase leading to his room. The moment he did so, he realized his

mistake. There was no longer any retreat; a few seconds of blind fear, and he had trapped himself at the top of the old house.

There was the sound of heavy steps beneath, and half sobbing, he sprang into his room, slammed and bolted the door.

Once inside, he looked about frantically in search of a weapon. There was nothing. He seized a chair and wrenched at one sturdy leg. A club was better than bare hands. But before he could break it off, there was a booming crash, and the massive door split like wet pasteboard. A pale, wire thewed arm, clad in a ragged grey sleeve, and covered with oily green hairs, thrust savagely through the panel. There was an odd, grating noise. Selden realized with a surge of nausea that it was the grinding of teeth.

A face appeared in the gap, and he froze, gripped by flaming yellow eyes, pupil-less, and full of inhuman ferocity. This was the end, of course, Selden knew. No use fighting a thing like that. At the same time, deep inside of him, he was sure this was only a nightmare, bound to end soon with his awakening. But if that was so, why didn't he face up to the monster, laughing—when a person *knew* it was only a dream, that had always ended the terror before.

Then he realized something significant. The creature was not coming in, after all, even though the door was no longer an obstacle. Instead, slavering with rage, it shielded its face from the lantern. Clearly, it was unable to stand the light at closer range.

Selden felt new hope, remembering the inscription of the carving. If he could keep the thing at bay until dawn, the danger would be over. With the first light, it would have to seek shelter. That meant, almost certainly, a return to the cellar. Once here, it would be trapped until nightfall, and by that time, a dozen State troopers with tommy guns, or even bazookas, if necessary . . .

Then Selden groaned. Fool, he thought; the can of gas was still outside in the car. There couldn't possibly be enough in this lamp to last more than an hour or so. He leaped over to it and made an estimate. Eighty minutes, maybe, at the most. And once the light failed, he was done for.

What about help? Any way to summon it? Not likely; the place was well isolated, and besides, what would be the use of calling somebody close enough to explain. The thing at the door, hearing a voice out there in the dark, would almost certainly take off after easier prey, with no lantern. And once in the open, at night—my God, the children! It came to him that the big party at the Dacre's would break up soon. When that

happened, several dozen little boys and girls would stream across those black fields towards their homes. Sure, there would be a few adults around, but much good they'd do against this horror. The thought of the insensate thing raging among a group of terrified children was more than Selden could stand. It was his fault, in any case. Why did he have to find the hidden door?

He turned for a look. The creature was still there, unwilling to give up. The awful travesty of a face would peer through the shattered wood, then, with bubbling cries, draw back from the light. Selden tensed. Would a really bright beam kill the monster? The flashbulbs!

He leaped to the bureau, wrenched open the top drawer, and there, by the camera, was the flashgun. How many of the tiny bulbs left? He'd used quite a few, taking pictures of the house for his wife. Damn; only four left. Should he set them off all at once, or individually? Better go for broke; maybe a single good flash would kill the thing, or at least disable it.

Hastily ignoring those highly unpleasant sounds at the door, Selden arranged the peanut bulbs so that one would fire the other three. Setting his teeth, he forced his unwilling body nearer the threshold. At his advance, the monster quivered with a kind of greedy anticipation, and one great paw poked through the sagging door. The light pained it, however, and, frustrated, the thing withdrew again.

Selden stood there, his heart pounding, just outside of reach, flashgun high and ready. In a moment the terrible, noiseless face peered in again, and he fired the bulbs. There was a thin screech of agony, and Selden could hear the great bulk writhing on the floor just past the entrance to the room. His hopes soared; but then the demon's suffering seemed to lessen, and it was clear that although it had received a nasty shock, it was far from finished. In another few minutes, it stood by the door again, keeping its relentless vigil, and obviously waiting for the light to die.

Selden examined the lamp. About half an hour to go. Light couldn't kill the thing, that was plain enough; at least, not four tiny flashbulbs. What else was there? Half feverishly he thought: light . . . vibrations . . . electro-magnetic field . . . electricity and—of course, electricity: it was related to light. So what; this damned relic of a house had none. Besides, a lousy 110 volts would be the midget flash all over. Unless your feet were in water, that much current couldn't kill a baby.

Then as he stood there, feeling that every possibility was gone, inspiration came. Just outside the fence, not a hundred yards away, stood

one of the great towers that carried high tension current across the state. Surely this was the only remaining solution. He must somehow lure this monster into touching one of those wires. How much did they carry? At least 75,000 volts. Some, 110,000, he'd heard. Even with a low amperage, if that didn't do it, nothing could, and he, Selden, would be the first of many victims.

His mind was racing now. There was only one way, and if those children were to be spared, now was the time. He took a deep breath, seized the lamp, and moved towards the door. If the thing refused to retreat, it was all over. . . .

But the demon was still vulnerable; unable to bear the clear, whitish light, it backed away with slobbering cries of rage. Slowly, his intestines knotted with fear, Selden forced the monster down the stairs, a step at a time, and out the front door. It was a critical move. From now on, no matter how much gas he had, there was no possibility of trapping the demon. Not when it had the whole county to move in. It would be like trying to checkmate with one piece. No, it was up to Selden to make the creature follow him to its doom.

Out in the cool air, he began to back towards the fence. No time to go around to the gate; the direct route was faster. He slipped the lantern through the rustic bars, vaulted over, and headed for the steel tower. Just behind, barely out of the light, nemesis followed implacably.

At the foot of the tall, steel structure, Selden hesitated. Should he leave the lamp here? It would burn for a while, keeping the monster off; then, when it went out, the thing could climb, and Selden would be ready. No. Suppose, before the light failed, the children came? He couldn't risk that. The lamp must go with him, to be quenched without delay at the right time.

He took the bail in his teeth, gripped a girder, and began. He'd never doubted for an instant that the thing could climb, and sure enough, it was following him up.

Even a college athlete in good condition would have found such a climb difficult, and Selden was no longer a boy. Nevertheless, thinking of the children in that gaily illuminated house a few hundred yards away on the hill, he found hidden reserves of strength. Slowly, panting and sweating, he inched his way up. It seemed to take hours, and the demon just below gnashed and snarled with the lust to destroy.

There! He could go no farther. Just overhead, now, was the nearest of the thick, aluminium cables, alive and humming with high voltage current. Damn! A new problem: that bright red light on the tower, just

over his head. It was meant to warn off small planes. Well, it would have to go, since the monster might not come otherwise. Selden held on with one hand, lamp in teeth, pulled out his handkerchief, and wrapped it about his knuckles. Stretching full length, he gave the heavy globe a mighty swat. It fizzed and quickly went out.

The lantern was sputtering, too. In a moment it would fail. There was no room at all for manoeuvre. Was the plan a failure even now? No, there was one desperate, last chance. Selden took the lamp from his teeth, set his jaw, and flung the thing like a meteor into the night. The monster gave a snarl of exultation; and flexing his knees slightly, Selden leaped into space. It was a mighty jump, and brought both hands against the lowest cable some ten feet from the tower. No current tore through his body, since he was ungrounded. Everything now depended on whether the monster imitated him exactly, or took what seemed a simpler course.

Standing near the top of the tower, the hulking thing stretched out one powerful arm, and gripped a cable. Whether it meant to shake Selden loose, or go after him, hand over hand, will never be known. There was a mighty spurt of blue flame as 75,000 volts of electricity crashed into the hairy body. Selden heard a long squalling cry, followed by a single deep groan. Then something was flailing up and back between tower and cable, arcing each time. It burned and burned and burned. . . .

Swamp Demon

LEW (SAILOR) BOYD was in no way your typical bank-robber; rather, he was a born outdoorsman and expert survivalist. From the age of sixteen, having beaten, almost to death, his father, who apparently had it coming, he had worked aboard many ships, both as deck-hand and mate, penetrated a dozen remote jungles, crossed the Gobi Desert twice, and knew most of the Amazon better than a good cop knows his beat.

Now, at forty, muscular, chunky, tough, very self-confident, essentially amoral, and cold as midnight on the moon, he still had an odd, perverse romantic streak, which made him regard his criminal activity as just another kind of adventure—knightly derring-do against a corrupt establishment. And it was a trade, or profession, as he saw it, considering his skill, that paid remarkably well—big bucks for short hours and no heavy lifting.

'They'll never expect me to escape through the swamp,' he told his latest girl, a tall, very busty, white-skinned blonde. (My woman better not look anything like a man, damn it; none of this unisex garbage!) 'The average crook is lost off a city street; me, I'm at home in any kind of jungle, desert, or mountain. And the more scared these yokels are of the swamp, the better my chances for a clean, easy getaway. I'll have a boat ready—the kind that uses a prop, and skims over all the weeds and water-lilies. I've used them in Central America, and they're perfect; go anywhere on six-inch-deep water.'

'Don't do it, Hon—not that way,' she begged, her big electric-blue eyes full of loving concern. 'It's not the swamp that scares me—it's the Demon.'

He gave a harsh laugh, almost a bark. 'You, too? I didn't think an airhead like you worried about anything but clothes and fancy rocks. There's no such thing as a Swamp Demon; in fact, there no anything

supernatural. Hell, I've heard such stories all over the world for almost twenty years, and nary a one ever checked out, even when I tried.'

'But all those people who disappeared; that's not just talk; they're gone. And nobody will go far into the swamp; that's what everybody says. It's really true, Hon.'

'Look,' he said, suddenly more patient, 'there's plenty of danger without bogeymen. You can get lost, drowned, eaten by alligators, snake-bit, God knows what-all, but just nature-in-the-rough, nothing supernatural. That's what happened to those jokers. They just had no savvy; city greenhorns pushing their luck.'

'No,' she insisted, too concerned about him to be biddable as usual. 'Some of the people who disappeared were old time swamp-rats—that's what they're called.'

'Then they got careless. Me, I never get careless. So, it's settled; I've thought it out. While the fuzz are going the long way around, thinking they're hot on my trail, I'll cut right through the centre of the swamp to Highway 435, and be out of the state before they know which end is up. That Swamp Demon malarkey is exactly what I need; it'll make them think I wouldn't dare go right into Demon territory, the idiots! I'll clean out their cracker-box vault—it'll have the Morgan Company payroll, at least two hundred thousand, and get away clean, thanks to Mr Demon.

'But, Honey——'

'No "buts". You can kiss this fleabag goodbye. Just meet me in Vegas, like I said. We'll blow in a little of the loot there, and then—who knows? Maybe Rio.'

'The people—no bodies; nothing; just gone,' she persisted, daring even his black scowl as she spoke.

'Drop it,' he gritted. 'You know I hate a nagging broad. I won't tell you again. I've got my SIG-Sauer. I've killed a tiger with that, so help me. One shot—powie! What the hell can there be in an American swamp? Black bears, maybe a panther, 'gators? A wild boar? Nothing compared to really wild countries along the Amazon.'

'No animal—you can handle them, I know, Hon. I believe you about the tiger, even; I really do. But this is different . . . not natural. I'm scared for you, not nagging.'

'I never met a ghost one nine-millimetre slug wouldn't dematerialize—or is it rematerialize,' he said smugly, too pleased with his quip to warn her again. 'And now start packing; I'm gonna go.'

All big swamps, as people familiar with the Florida Everglades can testify, are partially *terra incognita*, and often dangerous, especially to the uninitiated. But the Swamp Demon was a mystery, qualitatively different, and a recent phenomenon. It was only in the last five years that not merely the rash, the ignorant, and the foolish had come to grief, terminally, but even the expert hunters and sportsmen who went too deeply into the matted, lush growth; they also vanished without a trace. In most cases, oddly, their boats had drifted back out, but few human remains were found, which was not in itself surprising, what with all the predators at large.

In at least one case, the puzzle was made trickier when a boat's cabin, almost hermetically sealed, contained the owner's skeleton, complete, and showing no signs of violence.

About that time, a rumour, impossible to verify, also came out. Cajuns previously at home in the swamp, but now terribly afraid of the centre, spoke vaguely of a huge, smoky shape, quasi-human in outline, that had been glimpsed far off on several occasions. Twice, heavily armed parties, well-equipped, had attempted to explore the danger area. Neither had returned, although one boat had drifted back, empty. It was unfortunate that radio transmission was very bad, often impossible, because of a huge Army installation nearby; its electronic activity tended to blot out any transmitter using less than 50,000 watts, so nothing on a boat could report back about the menace, once that appeared.

'Swamp Demon got 'em all,' was the whispered explanation that most natives accepted, and further expeditions were not mounted for lack of experienced volunteers.

A swamp, like a lake or a forest, is almost an organism, and if you radically alter its elements, change its basic parameters, it may evolve, and not along lines favourable to humanity. This swamp had indeed been attacked; dams and their sponsors, government, farmers, were all stealing its waters, so it began to change. Some species of animals and plants decreased markedly in numbers; others gained—and there was something just different enough to be new. . . .

'See,' Sailor's woman said, as she stood by the loaded station-wagon. 'They wrote it up again in the paper—you know, the skeleton in the cabin. It got that man, and he was good, like you, a whiz on all the jungle stuff.'

'Maybe,' he said impatiently. 'Still he goofed somewhere; that's the only explanation. I've been all over the world in really dangerous spots,

and I'm still alive. I could tell you stories—ah, forget it; I've always hated the old, windy blokes talking about the past.'

'But what about that shape? Like a giant man against the sky?'

'When a guy's really spooked, he'll see anything, believe me. A vine becomes a snake, a shadow a head-hunter on the prowl—and a bit of smoke from burning brush a ruddy great demon. Hogwash! Now get going; see you in Vegas on Monday.' Sombrely, she kissed him with a desperate intensity, and drove off.

The first part of the bank job went off nicely, if you discount the manager's viewpoint. A sometime mining foreman in Bolivia, Boyd was handy with blasting gelatin, nitro, dynamite, military plastics, and even wilder explosives found only in the hinterlands, that would whiten hair in more civilized regions.

He blew the old vault with a perfectly calculated charge, quickly and with relatively little noise, gathered up all the folding money, disdaining the 'silver' which wasn't, and was hurrying out of a side door, when the operation went sour. One of the town's only two cruisers, supposed to be on duty elsewhere at that time of the night, came by for no reason.

Sailor, ever the careful strategist, had studied the police schedules for several days and nights, and so was justifiably annoyed by this deviation. The deputy at the wheel, a beefy, red-faced, genial good-ol'-boy, was the sort Boyd got on well with as a rule. He was inclined to like rural cops, regarding them as near-adventurers who took risks, and so of his own totem.

But this one leaped out of the cruiser, amazingly agile for his bulk, and having no doubts about the shadowy figure gliding away from the bank with a loaded satchel, opened fire without so much as yelling 'Halt!'

Being, like so many cops, a poor shot, what with ammunition expensive and little practice in marksmanship, he missed his target by at least a foot. The indignant Boyd, like most career criminals a stickler for civil rights of his own, felt that the guy had asked for it by firing with no warning. With his thick wrist and powerful forearm, using a two-handed grip, Sailor was more accurate. The 9mm slug caught the unfortunate deputy right in the breastbone, and he was dead before striking the concrete. Boyd had aimed to kill—he hated being shot at—and usually hit where he aimed.

'Damned fool!' he muttered, running for the car he had stolen

earlier. 'Had to be a hero, and break the rules, too. No warning, the creep!' He was not cruel or brutal, but a hard life had forged a suitable philosophy in him. Nowhere on earth had he found human life other than cheap, and had created his own mordant comment, to be used at news of any catastrophe that killed its thousands: Another ant stepped on!

He ditched the car eight miles from town, near a small lagoon where the rented swamp-buggy was hidden. Hastily he scrambled on board, checked the supplies again, just in case, and found them intact: plenty of gas, enough food, a fine lensatic compass, and even a 12-gauge shotgun—good, he felt, for the Demon, should any such entity appear. Then, with roughly $200,000 between his feet, Sailor Boyd headed straight for the heart of the swamp. If they came after him, it would have to be around the circumference, and that would assure his lead. Nor was there any place they could alert by radio or phone, not by the time they found the car and figured out what was happening.

Driven by its oversize propellor, the buggy sailed along over weeds and various marsh-grasses. Egrets and other birds, many brilliantly hued, reminding him of the tropics, rose up, squawking; the brighter the plumage, the more raucous the voice, he reflected. Same with some broads—dressed to the nines, perfectly groomed, gorgeous lookers, like as not, and then the speech; talk about corn-crakes! . . . a huge 'gator lazing by took his thoughts away from the paradox.

Boyd had figured it would take him about three hours to reach the swamp's centre, and he was right. He was just congratulating himself on how well his plan had worked, when he saw the Swamp Demon dead ahead.

It, if one could call something that which was not a single creature, but a terrible multiplicity, never moved far from its place of origin; perhaps a primitive form of territoriality had been born, too. A product of special forces—different drainage, altered sunlight, changed humidity, gene-damaging pesticides that had run off farms, and perhaps even some residual radioactivity from the last nuclear underground tests not far away. Above all, the subtle magician's wand of Natural Selection, somehow speeded up here, but none of that mattered now: the Swamp Demon loomed over Sailor Boyd, gigantic, roughly man-shaped, invulnerable to bullets or blades or clubs. And the adventurer, tough, cynical, wise in the powers of nature, knew that he was doomed, that the SIG-Sauer could not save him.

Ironically, the Demon held its man-shape almost to the last, but that

was surely not intentional, but more some aspect of its bulk, mass, interplay, and dynamics of motion. It was, Boyd knew, cursing himself for not guessing, something he might have figured out from the stories in town. Now it was too late; the buggy had no suitable shelter, and only a completely sealed one would work, anyhow. He remembered the skeleton, and even his spirit quailed briefly. The end would be quick, though, and essentially painless, so to hell with it; nobody said he'd live forever!

Then the enormous cloud of blood-sucking gnats, the tiny implacable no-see-ums, a mutant of the ordinary species, which was bad enough to drive a man mad, now swarmed in its thirsty millions about Sailor Boyd, blotting out the rising sun.

It was pointless, of course, and quite futile, but it was his basic nature, so he fought, thrashing about, rolling on the deck, and flailing with his muscular arms, all the while cursing in a low, hoarse monotone. But very soon he lay still, much bloated and pale, drained almost dry of blood.

The Swamp Demon, satiated, moved off slowly, even more shapeless now, closing in on a panicked deer that leaped, pranced, and circled in vain to escape. After which the buzzards came for Boyd, and finally the tiny red ants, forever ravenous in their uncounted numbers, which leave nothing but gleaming white bones. . . .

The Shadowsmith

THERE ARE VERY FEW shadowsmiths nowadays. They have never been numerous, for shadowsmithing is more of an art than a trade; the mere technique, although incredibly exciting, means little without a broad foundation of creative talent. No engineer is required to know as much about light, the texture of materials, and the vexations of projective geometry. Obviously, to mention but a single detail, a shadow thrown brashly upon soiled grey concrete by a July sun at noon, is related only distantly to one flickering at midnight upon candle-lit, waxed hardwood. Only the best of shadowsmiths understand the subtle colours of shadows: the intense blue-black of full vigour, shading into fuzzy slate as the light wanes; and most difficult of all, perhaps, the gauzy silver moonshadow when high-riding clouds and leaves shatter the image to dancing flecks.

Now, paradoxically enough, a shadowsmithy is a studio of light. There are sunlamps and candles; fireplaces and fluorescent tubes; spotlights that probe with bold white fingers; and multiple-source reflectors that dabble obscurely in penumbras.

Yes, there are few of these strange artists left, but Karabel was a man of great persistence, eaten up by hate; moreover he was ready to spend his life savings for revenge, and so he finally met Redi, last of the master shadowsmiths.

His success was due to a fortunate coincidence. If Luis Alvarez, late of Mexico, and now—quite illegally—in Los Angeles, had not been in the habit of sunning himself, and little Maria, in the park across from Karabel's apartment, the matter would have been handled otherwise. For it was Luis who first spoke to Karabel about shadows and the evil men able to manipulate them.

'A shadow can be very bad, Señor,' he said gravely, stroking Maria's black hair. 'Just before the little one here was almost killed by the fever, Tia Elena saw a great misshapen shadow, like a strange bird, reach for the

child with its talons. If Elena had not snatched Maria away in time . . .' His black eyes glittered, and he touched the knife-hilt under his faded shirt. 'If I knew who tried to hurt my little Maria . . .'

He went on to speak of the shadowsmith who once passed through the village, summoned, no doubt, by the patron, an enemy of the Church. Karabel listened with interest. He had travelled widely, and was wise enough to accept the occult. In Haiti his last doubts had died. Magic could kill, and was singularly police-proof. He would find a shadowsmith to implement a very simple plan. One that would dispose of Marsden for good.

It had been a long, frustrating search, but now it was over.

A small man was Redi, fragile and wrinkled, like crumpled tissue. A wispy fellow, grey and wise as a badger, who had oily marbles for eyes, and a voice that hummed thinly like a great swarm of gnats.

'Ordinarily my price would be far beyond your means,' he told Karabel. 'But I'm retiring, and your conception pleases me. Tomorrow I'll be gone; the profession is dead. I shall wander the earth, just observing new and interesting shadows. There should be wonderful ones on blue snow under the midnight sun. But this one last job for the sheer love of it, and as a farewell. You are lucky.'

Karabel flicked one thick hand impatiently, so strong was his hate. 'A profile,' he said in a peremptory tone. 'Just a sharp black profile. That's all I need. There's no necessity for fancy techniques.' He thrust a photograph at Redi. 'Like this. And here are others, from many angles.'

The shadowsmith gave them a casual glance. 'You don't understand,' he rebuked Karabel. 'One doesn't ask a sculptor to carve a statue true to its subject from only one point of view. An artist requires complete freedom.'

'A single good projection will do the job, so why——?'

'Your new shadow,' Redi broke in, his marble eyes unblinking, 'must be unexceptionable from every direction. Further, it must be adjusted to many backgrounds, and able to shift smoothly from one configuration to another. A shadow, also, that bends properly over right angles; for example, when cast upon a kerbstone. One that matches its length to the altitude of the sun. There is much work, but I am retiring tomorrow, and cannot countenance slipshod inattention to even the smallest details.'

Karabel's head flew back; he opened his mouth for an angry protest. Then, remembering his need and the long search, he snapped ungraciously: 'Very well. You artists are all alike. It takes a business man to

use common sense. Let's get going right away. I'll be using the shadow tomorrow.'

'As you like. We'll do the profile first, then.'

He led his sullen client to a small dais about four feet from a white wall, and after switching on a powerful spotlight, tugged him gently into position. He made a number of minor adjustments in Karabel's stance, had him remove a floppy jacket, and buzzed with satisfaction.

'Good. Stand very still. No, don't turn your head.'

Black and clear, Karabel's shadow rested motionless upon the creamy plaster.

'Ah, excellent. A strong shadow, indeed; it has much character. See how boldly the rascal poses!' He took the photographs and studied them, glancing at the wall occasionally.

Karabel tried hard to watch from the corner of one eye, but it was difficult. Nevertheless what little he managed to see fascinated him, and his pique was soon forgotten. Redi began by using a heavy black pigment to extend certain parts of the shadow. Swiftly, with a deft series of strokes, he changed Karabel's button of a nose into a huge, fleshy hook; his sleek hair became a miniature haystack. A skilfully brushed border at suitable points enlarged the whole head and strengthened the receding chin.

Redi chirped his approval, put the tube of pigment aside, and took another. Karabel gave a little gasp, as with this new, neutral shade, the shadowsmith proceeded to erase portions of the silhouette. The thin neck grew heavy; the slender waist became a paunch; the narrow hips acquired padding. Certainly, Redi was a craftsman. Apparently each finger had pores that acted like tiny suction cups, for Karabel could see him tugging edges of shadow into place by an odd, stroking—almost coaxing—manipulation, buzzing the while in his somnolent voice. Finally he gave a gusty sigh.

'There,' he said, with a faint, crinkly smile. 'Considering my mood, it's by no means a bad job so far. Don't move,' he added irritably, as Karabel started involuntarily to turn for a glimpse. 'Wait until I fix it in place.' Muttering, he grabbed the pigment tubes and retouched some hazy borders caused by his client's movement. Then, as Karabel rolled his eyes sideways to the limits of their orbits, Redi produced a handful of silvery adhesive strips and began to fasten the shadow's perimeter firmly to the wall.

When all the stickers were in place, he cautioned Karabel again, and

with a brush of foamy golden hairs laid a transparent varnish over the immobilized shadow.

'Not yet,' he rapped. 'Stand absolutely still. A few moments until it hardens. The first struggle with these wilful ones is important. When they know who's master, the rest goes more smoothly.'

Karabel waited impatiently. A tiresome ordeal, but he was lucky to have found this studio at all. Redi touched the varnish, found it tacky, and said grudgingly: 'Now—you may step down and see.'

Karabel exhaled, grunted with relief, and stepped off the dais. He took a long look, nodding his gratification at the sight. There, on the wall, was the shadow of Marsden: the great, shaggy head, vulture nose, wide, flabby torso, and the elephantine thighs. The shadow rippled as he watched; little waves rolled across it, a mute protest against the unnatural restraint.

'Fine,' he complimented Redi. 'You know your business, all right. I'll make out a cheque——'

The glinting marbles filmed over, and the shadowsmith's puffy, bluish mouth tightened.

'We're not through. It doesn't go so fast. Come.'

For a moment Karabel stood defiant, then with a shrug of annoyance, he followed the little man.

The rest of the afternoon was hectic. Karabel's shadow was cast on concrete, wood, grass, and water, Redi re-shaping it on each surface. He held himself rigid in light from sunlamps, candles, log fires, and mercury arcs. And for each type of background and illumination, the expert adjusted his client's shadow to a variety of positions, sometimes using paints, others pulling with his long fingers. No matter how he stood, now, Karabel threw the shadow of a gross, big-nosed man instead of his own. When he grumbled over unnecessary poses, Redi coldly ignored him, except to explain once, 'These are merely "key fixes"; the shadow must interpolate all the infinitely many intermediate positions. But yours, luckily, is a shadow of remarkable—ah—presence.'

Finally, after four hours of arduous posing, Karabel was permitted to relax in a chair.

'How long will my new shadow last?' he demanded.

Redi shrugged. 'Anywhere from two to five days. You are a strong-willed man, and your shadow is quite rebellious. I wouldn't count on more than three days at the most.'

'Hah!' Karabel broke into a harsh laugh. 'After this job is done, it can

be mad at the whole world, for all I care. There's nothing it can do to me.'

'True enough.' The marbles glinted slyly. 'One thinks of such phrases as "a shadow of himself", and others implying weakness, impotence. Well, let me give you a word of warning. This fellow of yours has tasted freedom of a kind completely new to it. Now when a man dies, his shadow, if sufficiently strong and aware, may become quite independent, associating itself with entities not of our world. During the few days needed for this one to revert after alteration, it will do anything to destroy you. Stay away from well-lit places, so that nobody, especially a friend of your enemy, will see the wrong shadow and perhaps get ideas. Once its present shape is lost, you should be safe. Until then, take care that it doesn't do you serious mischief.'

'Thanks for the tip,' Karabel said airily. 'How much do I owe you?'

'There is no charge. It was my last commission; I do it for love of the game—and for the final outcome.'

'Just as you like.' He showed his relief. He had expected to pay well for vengeance, but so much the better. If Redi wanted to be a sucker, it was no skin off him. Briefly, as he left, his shadow, now squat and bulky, flickered over one wall.

As he drove away with the main hurdle passed, Karabel reviewed the rest of his plan. Laura must die, too; that was the key. Marsden couldn't have stolen her so easily if she weren't corrupt. That was the beauty of his plan; it would take care of both, and he would be in at the kill, with nobody any the wiser. Even if Marsden suspected who was framing him, there wasn't a thing he could do about it. In fact, if it were merely a matter of putting the swine away, Marsden had a pretty vulnerable past. Larceny, confidence games, and maybe even a murder. Luckily Karabel knew more about Marsden than the other did about him. But those old crimes couldn't be made to stick. The latest would do much better.

He rehearsed the sequence of events once more. First, Marsden must be lured away in such a manner that his movements at the critical time would be unknown to impartial witnesses. He would have to depend on his own unverified testimony. Of vital importance was a witness to the murder, but, after all, it was the old lady whose consistent snooping had suggested this very scheme. Once her attendant left at about eight, the invalid sat propped up in bed by the window, watching. And there were only two places worth her scrutiny: the gay porte-cochère of the Two-Five Club, half a block down, and the few windows directly opposite hers, of which Laura's was one.

There was no doubt whatever that anything dramatic and not too fleeting which took place would be spotted instantly by the nosy old woman. But—and here was the beauty of it—she would be unable to summon help until well after the killer had escaped. Any loud screams or vigorous action was beyond her powers. What she *would* supply was damning testimony, all the more so because no grounds for bias existed. Yes, Karabel, reflected, with any luck at all, it should work.

Ethically, he had no qualms. His had always been a ruthless nature, and Marsden had injured him. As for Laura, he'd been generous; how could she prefer an ugly, slippery character like Marsden? It hurt. Well, tomorrow night would be the final accounting for them both.

At nine the next evening, using a disguised voice, he phoned Laura's apartment, and asked for Marsden. Sure enough he was there; that was routine for a Friday. Karabel pretended to be calling from a farm five miles out on an unimproved road. Marsden's sister, he reported breathlessly, had been critically injured in a car smash-up. Could he drive out there at once? His sister was asking for him, and might not live long. In five minutes, Marsden was on his way. Karabel knew that Laura would stay behind; she hated the sight of blood or suffering.

Standing on the sidewalk a few yards from the Two-Five Club, Karabel saw his enemy leave, and smiled crookedly. He used a few of his precious moments to verify discreetly that the old lady was at her post, then slipped up to Laura's flat by the side door, which was safely out of the invalid's field of view. He rapped gently. She'd probably think it was Marsden coming back for some reason, but in any case, Laura was not timid about opening her door.

She gave a little gasp when she saw him, clutching, foolishly enough, at her robe. A bit late for modesty with him. For a moment she seemed about to slam the door, but he shouldered his way in, smiling reassurance, and she retreated.

'I thought you weren't going to have any more to do with me, ever,' she said, a faint sneer in her throaty voice. 'Well, you can't stay here! I'm expecting company soon.'

'Marsden won't be back for some time,' he said coolly, looking her over. She really wasn't much; too plump; not very bright; but when she fixed those enormous greenish eyes at a man, and purred—there was no other word for it—you just had to grab her.

She was glaring at him.

'What do you mean? How dare you spy on me! That's just typical——'

'Take it easy.' He dropped to the divan, and as if the lamp bothered

his eyes, shoved it casually to a new position. Its hard yellow rays struck the drawn shade squarely. He stood up, flexing his thick fingers. Before she could scream, his muscular hands were on her throat. When she was limp in his grasp, he deliberately held their shadow on the blind while squeezing her soft neck pulseless. Then, still holding her limp body, he paraded up and down, always pausing to display Marsden's shadow starkly on the light cloth.

After some moments of this, he switched off the lamp, and cautiously, with the utmost care, raised a tiny corner of the shade to peer out. Ah! There was no doubt whatever. The old lady was slowly and feebly dragging herself from the bed. How scrawny she was! In the dim light of the room, he glimpsed her distorted, tallowy face. Judging from her progress, the cops should show up just about when Marsden got back. They'd think he was returning to remove some evidence. But that didn't matter; Marsden's presence there that night, and the shadow on the blind, would combine to bring him to the Death House. Now to clear out. Calmly, without a glance at his victim on the floor, Karabel left.

Karabel enjoyed the trial. Marsden's terror and bewilderment were delicious. The man simply didn't know what was happening to him. Opportunity was easily proved; he'd admitted being at the scene of the crime. There was even a motive; more than Karabel had hoped for. Marsden had lost some of Laura's money in a wild stock gamble—how typical, Karabel thought.

The police had found the defendant sobbing over the body; the remorse of an unstable neurotic. As for the mysterious phone-call hoax, there was no evidence. Nobody had seen him on the back road, or could have vouched for his identity if he had. The only evidence that was clear and unequivocal was the old lady's testimony. There was no way to shake it. She proved, right in the courtroom, that she was far-sighted, with eyes like telephoto lenses. The shadow was undoubtedly, uniquely, that of a fat, large-headed, hook-nosed man. She had seen it plainly, and several times. Yes, it was a shadow familiar to her. On many previous nights she had noticed it; and the way those two carried on, putting the light out so late! Peeping Tom, indeed! She flayed the defence attorney in her barely audible, wheezy voice. When a body was badly crippled, and her only pleasure was watching the gay crowd in front of the Two-Five Club, how could she help seeing the well-lit

window right across? She was a decent woman, and never looked at folks that weren't fully dressed. With no hesitation, she identified Marsden's silhouette from among a dozen similar ones. There could be no doubt.

The verdict was obvious.

Karabel left the courtroom at three. It was a grey, cloudy day, which pleased him, for his shadow had been misbehaving. Even Redi seemed to have underestimated its stubborn independence. To be sure, Marsden's shadow had soon faded, but Karabel's refused to make a whole-hearted return. At times it looked more like an amorphous blob than the outline of a man.

There was another annoyance. Luis Alvarez had taken to crossing himself when Karabel went by. Even though the man knew nothing, and had no evidence, it was irritating. For two cents he'd clout the greasy fellow—damned foreigner.

There he was now, sitting with Maria, hoping for some sun. Karabel thought of crossing to the other side, but decided against that. Instead, he'd have a talk with the little fool and try to win him over.

When he stopped in front of the Mexican, Alvarez seemed to shrink back in the chair. He made the sign of the cross in front of Maria.

'What the hell's that for?' Karabel snapped. 'I haven't done anything to you.'

'Go away,' Luis said thickly. 'You and that shadow of evil.'

'Don't be a fool. I'm the same as always.'

Alvarez was on his feet, the child on one arm. The sun moved briefly from behind a cloud, and the little man's black eyes widened. Then they turned to chips of ice. There, right on the sidewalk, Karabel's shadow had become that of a great bird. Its talons were sliding inexorably towards little Maria.

'No!' Luis cried. '*Sangre de Cristo*, no! Not again.' Before Karabel knew what was happening, there was six inches of bright steel in his chest.

The last thing he saw, before death came, was his newly freed shadow, frolicking on the dirty concrete.

Brilliant Career

IT WAS ALMOST NOON when Lieutenant de Tournay reached the small secluded château of Don Esteban. The Spaniard was newly arrived from Cordoba, having been hounded out of his home by the Inquisition, which had little love for sorcerers and none for infidels.

The young officer drew rein for a moment before descending into the well-wooded, rather gloomy hollow. The château seemed brooding and sinister to his superstitious mind, and he briefly considered abandoning the visit. Then he thought of what people said about Don Esteban's powers, and what they might mean to an ambitious man. His thin lips drew taut; he dug the cruel spurs into the horse's wet flanks, and galloped towards the building.

At the door he dismounted and reached for the heavy knocker. It was in the shape of a taloned hand, and he hated to touch the greenish metal. When finally he seized the rough casting and slammed it briskly against the wood, it seemed to him that the fingers were warm and twisted in his grasp.

Abruptly the door swung open in perfect silence, and he found himself confronted by a tiny Moorish maid.

'I have come to see Don Esteban,' he told her imperiously.

'My master is expecting you, Lieutenant,' she replied in bad French. 'Please enter.'

Bewildered, he followed her down a long dark corridor, heavily carpeted. How could the Spaniard know of his visit? He hadn't decided to come until late last night, and had told nobody. Very likely the man made the same absurd claim to every caller. Yet de Tournay hoped fervently that Don Esteban had all the strange powers imputed to him; only then could the officer expect the kind of help he so urgently desired.

They reached a door at the end of the hall; the maid opened it, and ushered him in. He saw that it was no ordinary chamber. Twice the size

of the average room, it was crowded with a vast assortment of unusual items. There were telescopes, chemical retorts, stuffed animals, and dozens of shelves filled with books.

De Tournay turned his attention to the man seated at a huge desk. The sorcerer was short and stocky, so dark as to suggest the Moor, and redeemed from extreme ugliness only by his eyes, which were wide set and apparently of boundless depth. His thick yet facile fingers were busy adjusting a brass astrolabe.

Smiling, he put the instrument aside.

'Please sit down.'

The officer dropped into an armchair, staring as if entranced at an enormous glass bowl in which a purple liquid seethed and purred hypnotically. There was no fire under it, and the Frenchman crossed himself automatically.

The tiny crowsfeet at the corners of Don Esteban's eyes deepened at this, but he said only, 'Why have you come to see me, monsieur?'

Drawing his eyes away from the boiling solution, de Tournay looked squarely at the Spaniard and said, 'I need your help, señor.'

'Indeed?' The heavy brows rose. 'In what way?'

'Advancement,' was the prompt reply. 'I am ambitious. To command a tiny garrison in this godforsaken provincial town is not my idea of a worthy career. I have imagination and courage—and a profound knowledge of political realities. If I could but find an opening—the tiniest crack, metaphorically speaking—at Court, I could rise to almost any height.'

'I see.' The brown eyes twinkled with amusement. 'But why—assuming, of course, that I have any control over your future—should I help you?'

'A powerful friend at Court can be useful to any man in these troubled times. Remember, there is an Inquisition in France, too, señor.'

'Very true. You are a clever young man. I begin to see why you favour a political career. And history repeats itself. There is a man in Spain who was aided by me. Thanks to him, I escaped with my life and fortune. But before that, I helped another young man, a novice politician like yourself. He proved to be an ingrate, and almost ruined me. How can I be sure of you, Lieutenant?'

'You have my solemn word as a gentleman. My family, señor, is as good as any in France. It is just that we are out of favour at present. Help me to a place at Court, and any protection in my power will be yours, no matter what political winds are blowing.'

'There is merit in what you say. The moment is indeed ripe; I need a friend in high places. As a foreigner and—ah—student of the occult, I am not in a position to act for myself. You, however—but I forget my duty as host.' He picked up a tiny brass hammer and rapped a silver gong. The vibrant notes had hardly died away before the Moorish maid entered.

'Desire the cook,' Don Esteban told her, 'to put another capon on the spit. Lieutenant de Tournay will stay to dine.' She curtsied and left. Suddenly the officer felt ravenously hungry. It had been some hours since breakfast.

The Spaniard now turned his luminous eyes to the young Frenchman. 'Tell me just what kind of opening at Court you have in mind.'

The other leaned forward, his sharp, pale face animated. 'If I could get a commission in the King's Musketeers! From there, a clever man can rise fast.'

'You are ambitious,' the sorcerer said dryly. 'That is the most exclusive regiment in France. Every vacancy is fought over by a dozen young bloods. Nevertheless, we shall see.'

He opened a drawer in the desk, took out a large crystal block, and placed it between them. He rubbed the top with one palm, making motions that were like caresses. Then he bent down for a long, searching scrutiny of the surface.

After several seconds he looked up, meeting the officer's gaze squarely. 'We are in luck. At this very moment a niece of Monsieur Tavannes, Captain of the Musketeers, is riding towards Vrillac. She will be attacked, about sunset, by several ruffians—hired by St Just. Now, if you should arrive at a critical time with, say, a dozen good men of your command . . . you see the possibilities. Save the niece, and Tavannes will be in your debt. He loves the girl.'

'*Bien!*' de Tournay cried. 'And all France knows Tavannes. He has no qualms, no subtlety. What he wants, he takes; and the King stands behind him. No matter who seeks a post with the Musketeers, it is for him to say yes or no.' He slapped his thighs gleefully. 'You are indeed a miracle worker, señor. I had feared you were a charlatan, but now all doubts are gone.'

'There are many kinds of miracle,' the sorcerer replied gravely. 'Gratitude among men is one of the rarest. You will not forget what I have done?' he demanded, peering deeply into the officer's eyes.

'Never! I swear it.'

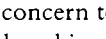
'Good. But I shall make sure.' He rapped the silver bell again, and the

thin, sweet notes bored into de Tournay's head, making it resound like a tuning fork. Giddy, the young man clapped his hands to his ears. It made no difference; the vibrations swelled to a crescendo, tearing at the roots of his brain. Then Don Esteban's calm voice restored him to normality.

'Now it is time to leave,' the Spaniard said. 'I suggest that you lie in wait, with your men, about a kilometre from Vrillac, on the North Road. Mademoiselle Cortot should arrive shortly before sunset.'

'Excellent!' the officer said with enthusiasm, as he rose. 'I go. And my deepest thanks, señor. I shall not forget what I owe you.'

He was humming a gay little air as the maid led him to the door.



If de Tournay still felt any lingering doubts about Don Esteban's powers, they were dispelled at sunset.

Waiting in a clump of trees just off the North Road, he saw the girl, riding a white palfrey, and accompanied by two men-at-arms, coming down the dusty path. Why she should be passing through this quiet province was a question of no concern to the officer. She was Tavannes' niece, arriving on schedule, and nothing else mattered.

When she was almost opposite his position, six riders, wearing the livery of St Just, charged down upon her. De Tournay guessed that they planned to hold her as a hostage, thereby guaranteeing the behaviour of Tavannes, who had often frustrated the plans of St Just, himself a powerful nobleman.

The young lieutenant, callously enough, waited until the two attendants had been slaughtered, despite their brave resistance. He wanted the girl to know real fear before being rescued. Then, at just the right moment, he galloped out with his dozen tough troopers, a gallant figure on his black warhorse, and scattered the attackers. He did not kill any, for at the back of his mind was the thought that St Just, too, was a power in the realm, and needn't be antagonised more than was strictly necessary in the situation.

The upshot was just what Don Esteban had predicted. The grateful Mademoiselle Cortot was delighted to help her rescuer by praising him to Tavannes. In a few weeks de Tournay, relieved of his dull post in Vrillac, was on his way to Paris, a newly commissioned junior lieutenant in the King's Musketeers.

Once established in that teeming city, he wrote enthusiastically to Don Esteban, letters full of professions of gratitude and esteem. 'It must

make one feel truly godlike, to wield such power over other men. I am deeply in your debt, my dear Don Esteban—my dear friend, let me say.'

But after some months, the letters became more querulous in tone. Advancement was no simple matter, even for a musketeer. There were intrigues on all sides. It was King against Cardinal; musketeer against the army; Monsieur, the King's brother, was an unknown quantity altogether. De Tournay urged the sorcerer to intercede just once more. After that, no more help would be needed. But now, almost a year in Paris, and still a junior lieutenant, it was intolerable.

Reluctantly, the Spaniard agreed to act, and to de Tournay's gratification in a few weeks he was promoted to the post of Senior Lieutenant of the company. Before him now, blocking his way to the real heights, there stood only Tavannes himself.

De Tournay decided to use the Cardinal, who loathed the Captain of the Musketeers, as a means to the end he sought. But nothing seemed to work out when Don Esteban stood aloof again. The young Frenchman's efforts to favour the Cardinal made his musketeers rebellious; and the Cardinal thereupon felt nothing but contempt for the officer who promised much but couldn't control his men.

In despair the lieutenant sent a series of special messengers to the sorcerer, asking for immediate help. There was a faint note of menace in these latest communications. A man as perceptive as Don Esteban could easily read between the lines. De Tournay had power now. Perhaps he wasn't destined to command the Musketeers, but he had more than enough influence to direct the Inquisition towards Vrillac and a certain infidel magician. Of course, if Don Esteban saw fit to help him again . . .

To the lieutenant's satisfaction, the indirect threats worked perfectly. The Spaniard sent a prompt rely, promising that de Tournay would soon have his wish. It was only a matter of days now.

The Frenchman couldn't help feeling sceptical, however. He was in considerable trouble at the moment; even Tavannes was losing faith in his senior lieutenant. In fact, if it weren't for the pleas of Mademoiselle Cortot, the gruff, honest captain would send that slippery young schemer packing. . . .

But, as always, Don Esteban got results. Some assassin, perhaps one of the Cardinal's supporters, put an ounce of lead through Tavannes' body, so that after two days of agony, the Captain died.

It was very fortunate for de Tournay that he just happened to be near enough to hear Tavannes' cries and neatly dispatch the killer. By so doing, he saved some highly secret papers destined for Monsieur, the

King's brother. It was an impressive performance, and one that made his appointment as Captain of the Musketeers inevitable.

Shortly after achieving this, the fulfilment of his highest hopes, de Tournay wrote again to Don Esteban. The note was brief to the point of curtness. The erstwhile lieutenant had risen to the summit, and now held a most precarious perch, surrounded by able, vindictive enemies. He was hated by the Cardinal and distrusted by his own men. He needed the sorcerer at his side so that no time would ever be wasted sending letters back and forth by courier. Don Esteban must come immediately to Paris.

The Spaniard replied that he was no longer young and preferred to stay where he was, in the pleasant greenery of the province. The next letter from Paris was brutally candid. Don Esteban hadn't been asked; it was an order. Join de Tournay, or else. . . . There followed veiled references to the Inquisition. Sadly the sorcerer complied.

On his arrival he was installed, more or less secretly, in tiny, dirty quarters in an outlying wing of the palace. At first, de Tournay was outwardly courteous, claiming concealment was vital. But he soon concluded that Don Esteban was losing his powers, since the man seemed to have aged and appeared both uneasy and frightened in the officer's presence. To de Tournay's suspicious mind, it seemed obvious that the sorcerer had hoped to profit from a few coincidences, and gain credit for his client's success. Such a charlatan was hardly likely to be of further use. Still, on the off-chance that this reasoning was faulty, the officer refused to let him leave Paris.

Meanwhile, de Tournay's prospects continued to improve. The King looked to him for everything, since, unlike the bluff, honest Tavannes, this captain offered no moral judgments on royal behaviour. Whatever the King wanted, the musketeer was willing to help him to obtain, regardless of the ethical problems involved. And no matter what the officer spent—and he lived very lavishly—the gold piled up. In addition to constant bribes, there was extortion; and whenever a 'traitor' had his estates confiscated, the Crown got some of the profits, but de Tournay a great deal more.

For Don Esteban, however, shivering in his unheated rooms, there was no prospect at all. His savings were gone, and food itself a problem. Those servants who knew of his existence naturally adopted the contemptuous attitude now habitual with their master. Why waste food on an old man with no friends? The stuff could be sold for good money.

In despair, Don Esteban decided to appeal directly to his one-time client.

And so, at about noon of a bright spring day, de Tournay looked up from his ornate desk to see the emaciated, white-haired figure of the Spanish sorcerer standing before him.

'*Mordieu!*' he exclaimed. 'What the devil are you doing here? You must not be seen with me.'

'But, Captain,' Don Esteban pleaded. 'I am actually starving here. The servants are openly insolent and won't even give me food. I am growing old, and will soon die in this place. Give me leave to return to Vrillac.'

'Impossible,' was the brusque reply. 'I may still need your help.' Then he studied the shabby form and frowned. 'Or will I? It's not likely. You are finished, old man; anybody can see that. Whatever power you had, there is nothing left any more. I believe now it was all coincidence. Go, then—back to your rat's nest in Vrillac. I care not what you do.'

The sorcerer shifted uneasily where he stood.

'Captain,' he said in a diffident voice, 'I have done as I promised two years ago in my château. Are you not Captain of the King's Musketeers? You swore to be my friend.'

De Tournay gave a braying laugh. 'So you think to take the credit for my advancement, *hein*? You are a fool. What I have achieved is due to my own merits entirely. Be gone, old man! You begin to anger me.'

The Spaniard shivered in his ragged clothes.

'I am penniless, monsieur. Give me a few coins for my expenses, and I'll go away.'

'Not an écu. Stop bothering me, and clear out quickly.' He fixed his pale eyes on the Spaniard. 'I am a good son of Mother Church, and have already overpaid any debt to you by my tolerance of your heresy. If you linger, I shall be forced to invoke the Holy Office.'

The old sorcerer stiffened, erect in his faded robes.

'Very well,' he said with dignity. 'I see I must go without funds. But of your charity, monsieur, at least some food for my journey. I have eaten nothing for many hours.'

De Tournay sprang to his feet, his sharp, pallid face contorted with anger.

'This is intolerable! That I, Captain of the King's Musketeers, should be defied in my own quarters by a filthy infidel sorcerer—not even a Frenchman. Guard!' he roared. 'Ho, the guard! To me, at once! Old man,' he added, coldly sinister, 'you have stayed too long. It's rack and stake for you now.'

'I think not,' Don Esteban said, his voice deep with authority. He reached out a thick finger and rapped its nail against the silver gong that stood on de Tournay's desk.

The vibrant note surged through the room, penetrating the officer's skull, and making it resound like a tuning fork. It hurt damnably, and de Tournay clapped his hands to his ears, crying out. The room swirled about him, dislimned, and re-formed.

He was back in Don Esteban's château. Why, there was that purple liquid purring its subtle song. But that was two years in the past; it was all very confusing.

'Since your gratitude doesn't even extend to the offer of a frugal meal,' Don Esteban was saying, 'I shall dine at my own château.'

As he spoke, the last notes of the silver bell died away, and the Moorish maid stood just inside the door, awaiting her master's orders.

'You see, my dear Lieutenant,' the Spaniard told the dazed officer, 'that surprisingly quick rise to power took place only in your mind, and lasted a mere two hours. I have learnt to test for gratitude in advance; it is much safer. The career was my invention; a fantasy that seemed quite real to you. But the character you displayed when achieving success was your own. It is a type I became familiar with many years ago, in a slow, painful manner. Luckily, thanks to my art, I no longer have to gamble on the effects of power.' He turned to the little maid.

'You will tell the cook that the second capon may now come off the spit. Lieutenant de Tournay,' he added, infinite scorn in his voice, 'will not stay to dine after all.'

The Shakespeare Manuscript

OLDENBURG, THAT CRABBED, grasping bibliophile, had found in his antiquarian researches a vastly intriguing passage concerning the demon, Belphegor. According to the monkish authority, it was possible to demand and receive service from this most arrogant of devils; and the necessary steps, repulsive and exhausting, were precisely listed.

Yet Oldenburg had so far resisted temptation, for the monk included a blunt warning that, heavenly punishment aside, Belphegor, terrible and subtle monster, was not lightly enslaved by any mere mortal, and once free again, would strike back in frightful ways at his temporary master. Quoting Milton with relish, the monk spoke of 'pangs unfelt before', and urged the superiority of prayer.

But now the bibliophile was desperate. His most hated rival, William Caughlin, had acquired—and this in a single phenomenal month—not only Queen Elizabeth's personal copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, with certain bawdy marginal notations of her own in that angular handwriting later generations found strangely attractive; but also a flawless first edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, probably the best preserved copy known. Thus, at one incredible stroke, Caughlin had made his collection of rare books unassailably superior to Oldenburg's library.

Elizabeth's *Romeo* was, of course, unique, and could not be duplicated; and the only outstanding Defoes, dealers knew, were irretrievably locked up in museums and college libraries. One by one, the greatest treasures of literature had been taken from the open market in favour of educational institutions. It was, Oldenburg felt, distinctly unfair to private collectors. He now stood a poor second to Caughlin; worse, competition was no longer even possible. All the top 'finds' were out of circulation permanently; you couldn't buy anything back from the Huntington Library or Harvard University. How was he to catch up?

There was, obviously, only one possible way to rectify an intolerable

situation. There might very well be something to the theory of devils and possessions. Summers thought so, as did that Murray woman, who wrote about witch-cults. In any case, it was worth a try. Oldenburg resolved to summon Belphegor, let the consequences be what they might.

It was conceivable, his authority declared, for a sufficiently legalistic and devious mind to render impotent so mighty a devil as Belphegor, by wringing adequate promises of immunity from him while he was temporarily subordinated. Such agreements, however unwillingly accepted, were invariably honoured to the letter; so much the monk admitted in favour of this particular rebel against God. The demon must perform exactly as ordered; and Oldenburg believed that the veritable injunction, carefully phrased, he was prepared to wield against Belphegor—should the creature actually appear, which seemed highly doubtful—would protect him from any reprisals.

To his pleased surprise, everything went as planned. When the grim ritual was completed, and the final incantation uttered, the study fire flickered thrice; a glinting, cloudy shape reared itself in the darkest corner, and a deep, soughing voice, steelly resonant with bright, non-human tones, announced, 'I am Belphegor. What is your will with me, Mortal? Speak now that I am here.'

Oldenburg, shaken but resolute, faced the vague form bravely enough. He was a true fanatic, whose standing as a bookman meant more to him than the danger of offending a demon. He recited in an almost mechanical way the statement he had memorized. Thus he guarded himself against any fatal oversights due to excitement or fear.

'Somewhere there must be,' he said in a loud sing-song voice, 'a manuscript play, or collection of plays, in Shakespeare's own hand. I order you to get it for me. I don't care how or where, except that it must not be the legal property of anybody in a position to challenge my ownership. And I want it today.'

He paused, took a long breath, and plunged into the second, precautionary statement.

'You are to obey that order literally: get the manuscript today; leave it with me, and depart. No more; no less. You are not to alter it in any way; particularly you must not enchant or poison it in order to injure me. Neither you nor your agents are to molest me at any time. I repeat: you are herewith bound, as circumstances authorize me to bind you, to

the strictly limited role of messenger, obtaining such a play, at your discretion, and bringing it back to me as it is. Do you agree?'

'I must, and I do,' Belphegor replied; and Oldenburg gulped queasily at what seemed the cool irony behind the demon's prompt submission. Anger would have been more reassuring by far.

'Then carry out my orders at once.'

The smoky image vanished; Oldenburg fought his knotted stomach. Let the demon squirm; with those commands it was impossible for him to strike back. By holding him to the exact letter of a single mission, and barring further commerce between them, the man surely had baffled the evil spirit. Nor would he make the mistake of summoning him again for more treasures. That was what doomed most meddlers—excessive greed. He would play it safe.

Oldenburg looked about the cozy, book-lined study, rubbing his palms together and chuckling fruitily. Which play would it be? And where would Belphegor find it? Even *Titus Andronicus* would do. There were many possibilities: hundreds of musty attics, store-rooms, and unexplored monasteries hid documents undreamed of by scholars. Take the Boswell Papers, for example, overlooked for decades in a castle constantly inhabited. Then there were the almost virgin collections of the remote Tibetan lamaseries, where among faded Asiatic scrolls a million lost English incunabula might be buried. Not three months earlier, a party reconnoitering among the Himalayas for some new peak to climb, had found, in just such a religious library, a perfect Coverdale Bible.

He was still musing, two hours later, when something dropped fluttering through the air to fall on the desk by his hand. It was a large booklet of soiled vellum, made by crudely binding together many scribbled leaves. On the cover, in faded ink, were the magic words: 'The Historie of Hamblett, Prince of Denmarke', and under them the rarest of all notable autographs. Oldenburg clutched the pamphlet; time stood still, while the stars sang together; and one corner of the priceless vellum was suddenly moistened. It was the first tear the misanthrope had shed since his childhood, forty years earlier.

For a week Oldenburg gloated over the manuscript. He made countless tests: microscopic examinations; chemical analysis of the ink; letter by letter scrutiny of every word; and an exhaustive comparison with a photograph of Shakespeare's authenticated signature, taken from his famous will. Unshaven, haggard, the bibliophile began to feel very seedy; inadequate meals, hastily gulped, and little or no rest, inevitably

took their toll. But he ignored such trivial inconveniences, glorying in his prize, and satisfied that Belphegor, after a week, had disappeared unavenged.

As he pored over the difficult script, Oldenburg would chuckle in delight on finding so many previous speculations of his confirmed; or, on occasion, grumble at mistakes that now seemed inexcusably stupid. He wondered often how best to make use of this unique touchstone. Perhaps it would be most fun to expose, very blandly, a dozen egregious errors on the part of each distinguished critic, from Coleridge and Johnson to Bradley and Kitteridge. And then his contemporaries—they would react in a fury, questioning the validity of his conclusions, and demanding evidence. Then later, he would discover the very manuscript needed to vindicate his stand. How they would fume in secret over his incredible prescience! He'd make a few minor errors, himself; it might not do to be too obvious. Even thinking about the possibilities was enough to make him snicker.

Ten days having passed since Oldenburg obtained the bundle of vellum, he sat red-eyed at his desk, adding to an enormous stack of note-cards, a photographic replica of the First Folio at his left.

'Idiot!' he muttered. '"Too solid flesh", is right, after all, and I declared for "Too sullied." Urrgh! What else could I do when that imbecile, Caughlin, took the other side. He's only one jump ahead of a Baconian. Well, let him enjoy his one petty victory; I've been right ten times to his once. Besides, I have—It!'

At that very moment, as he patted the booklet lovingly, flaming talons tore at his vitals. Gasping, he shrank in the chair. His bones were shafts of searing agony, and a tom-tom throbbed in the tenderest fibres of his brain.

'Oh, my God!' he cried weakly, attempting to rise. It was impossible; he hadn't the strength; he was dizzy and nauseated. A few moments earlier he had been vaguely uneasy, his head aching mildly; but now a mere indisposition of some days, which he had assigned to hunger, fatigue, and excitement, was giving way to something that gripped stomach and bowels like a tiger.

'What's wrong with me?' he groaned, as a dull saw divided his skull. 'The phone—I'll call a doctor——'

Making a desperate effort, he succeeded in standing up and shoving back the heavy armchair; but after one lurching step, he staggered; his knees gave way, and twisting in a half turn, he just managed to crumple against the desk.

His blurring gaze rested once more on the vellum bundle. 'The only one in the world,' he thought muzzily. 'Where has this *Hamlet* been hidden for so long? Where did he find it?'

Then he heard, echoing in a measureless distance, a mocking laugh, and the vibrant tones of the great demon.

'I was free to find it anywhere—and chose Time instead of Space. I snatched it from the hands of a dying man, a bookish fellow; it was in London, and the year was 1665. *I* did nothing to the play—merely carried it to you as ordered.'

A grinding sickness overwhelmed the man's body. 'What was he dying of?' he muttered, groping mentally for some far-off, terrible knowledge that eluded him.

'It was the year of the Great Plague. *You* know what he was dying of—*Master!*' And with a final burst of ironic laughter, the taunting voice was gone.

$1.98

THAT MORNING WILL HOWARD was taking a Sunday stroll through the woods, a pleasure which lately had been shared and intensified by Rita Henry. Not even the bright sun, the bracing air, the unique song of a canyon wren, could lighten Will's dark thoughts. Right now she was out riding with Harley Thompson at an exclusive country club. Will couldn't blame her. Harley was six feet two, a former Princeton tackle; ruggedly handsome, full of pleasant small talk; the young-executive-with-a-big-future. And he, Will Howard, a skinny, tongue-tied fellow——

At that moment he felt something tug feebly at one trouser cuff, and looked down to see a tiny field mouse pawing frantically at the cloth. Gaping, Will studied the palpitating animal, completely baffled by such strange behaviour on the part of so timid a creature. Then the springy, leaping form of a weasel, implacable, fearless even of man, appeared on the trail.

Quickly Will scooped the terrified rodent into one palm. The weasel stopped, making a nasty, chikkering sound, eyes red in the triangular mask of ferocity that was its face. For a heartbeat it seemed about to attack its giant opponent, but as Will stepped forward, shouting, the beast, chattering with rage, undulated off the path.

'You poor little devil,' Will addressed the bright-eyed bit of fur in his hand. A crooked smile touched his lips. 'You didn't have a chance—just like me and Thompson!' Stooping, he deposited it gently in the underbrush. Then he stared, his jaw dropping. In place of the mouse, there appeared suddenly a chubby, Buddha-like being, some two inches tall. Actually, as measurement would have revealed, it stood precisely one and ninety-eight hundredths inches.

In a voice which although faint was surprisingly resonant, the figure said: 'Accept, O kindly mortal, the grateful thanks of Eep, the God. How can I reward you for saving me from that rapacious monster?'

Will gulped, but being an assiduous reader of Dunsany and Collier, he recovered promptly. 'You—you're a god!' he stammered.

'I am indeed a god,' the being replied complacently. 'Once every hundred years, as a punishment for cheating in chess, I become a mouse briefly—but no doubt you've read similar accounts to the point of excessive boredom. Suffice it to say, you intervened just in time. Now I'm safe for another century—unless, of course, I succumb to temptation again and change a pawn to a bishop. It's hard to resist,' he confided, 'and helps one's end game immensely.'

Will thought of Harley Thompson, the heel that walked like a man. The fellow who laughed at fantasy, who ribbed him for reading the *Magazine of Not-Yet but Could-Be.* Well he knew that behind Thompson's personable exterior was a ruthless, self-seeking, egotistical brute. Rita could never be happy with a man like that. Here was a chance to gain his first advantage over Harley. With the help of a grateful god, much could be achieved. That Dunsany knew the score, all right. Maybe three wishes—but that was tricky. Better let the god himself choose. . . .

'You mentioned a—a reward,' he said diffidently.

'I certainly did,' the god assured him, swinging on a dandelion stem and kicking minute bare feet luxuriously. 'But, alas, only a small one. I am, as you see, a very small god.'

'Oh,' Will said, rather crestfallen. Then brightening: 'May I suggest that a *small* fortune——?' Truly the presence of an immortal was sharpening his wits.

'Of course. But it would have to be exceedingly small. I couldn't go above $1.98.'

'Is that all?' Will's voice was heavy with disappointment.

'I'm afraid it is. We minor gods are always pinched for funds. Perhaps a different sort of gift——'

'Say,' Will interrupted. 'How about a diamond? After all, one the size of a walnut is actually a small object, and——'

'I'm sorry,' the god said regretfully. 'It would have to be tiny even for a diamond. One worth, in fact, $1.98.'

'Curse it!' Will groaned. 'There must be something small——'

'There should be,' the little god agreed good-naturedly. 'Anything I can do, up to $1.98, just ask me.'

'Maybe a small earthquake,' Will suggested, without much enthusiasm. 'I could predict in advance. Then perhaps Rita——'

'A small earthquake, yes,' Eep replied. 'I could manage that. But it

would be the merest trembler. Doing, I remind you, damage only to the amount of $1.98.'

Will sighed. 'You sound like a bargain basement,' he protested.

'Of course,' the god mused aloud, as if sincerely seeking a solution, 'by taking the money in a different currency—say lira—it would *seem* like more; but the value would actually be the same.'

'I give up,' Will said. Then, in a more kindly voice, as Eep looked embarrassed, 'Don't feel too bad. I know you'd like to help. It's not your fault that money's so tight.' Glumly he added: 'Maybe you'll think of something yet. I'm selling now, or trying to—I'm not much of a salesman. Once the client sold *me* his office furniture. But if you could arrange a good sale——'

'It would bring in only $1.98.'

'That wouldn't be easy,' Will told him, smiling wryly. 'Right now I'm handling diesel locomotives, office buildings, and abandoned mines. And I'm vice-president in charge of dry oil wells.'

'Any luck so far?' the little god demanded, kicking a grasshopper, which soared off indignantly.

'I almost sold an abandoned copper mine to a wealthy Californian for an air-raid shelter, but Thompson nosed me out—again. He showed him how one gallery in another mine could be made into the longest—and safest—bar in the world. It killed my sale; the man bought Thompson's mine for $67,000. That infernal Harley!' he exclaimed. 'I wouldn't mind his getting the supervisor's job instead of me; I'm no good at giving orders, anyhow. Or his stealing my best customers. Even his lousy practical jokes. But when it comes to Rita——! Just when she was beginning to know I'm alive,' he added bitterly.

'Rita?' the god queried.

'Rita Henry—she works in our office. A wonderful girl. So sweet, so—alive, and with the most marvellous greenish eyes——'

'I see,' Eep said, thumbing his nose at a hovering dragonfly.

'That's why I could use a little help. So do what you can, although it can't help much with a ceiling of——'

'—$1.98,' the god completed his sentence firmly. 'I shall spend the afternoon and evening here contemplating the place where my navel would be if I were not supernatural. Trust the Great (although small) God Eep. Farewell.' He walked into the grass.

Much too depressed for any amusement, Will spent the evening at home, and at 11.00 went gloomily to bed, convinced that a mere $1.98 worth of assistance, even from a god, was unlikely to solve his problem.

In spite of such forebodings, he was tired enough from nervous strain to fall asleep at once, only to be awakened half an hour later by a timid rapping at the apartment door.

Blearily, a robe over his pyjamas, he answered it, to find Rita standing on the threshold. She gave him a warm smile that was bright with promise.

'Rita!' he gasped. 'Wha——?'

One finger on her lips, she slipped in, closing the door softly behind her. Then she was in his arms, her lips urgent, her body melting.

'Rita,' Will murmured, 'at last . . .'

She gazed up at him. Was there just a hint of puzzlement, of bewilderment in those green eyes? 'Something just seemed to force me . . . I had to come. . . .' She took his hand and led him to the bedroom. There, in the warm darkness, he heard the whispery rustle of silk. 'I had to come,' Rita said again. 'We're right for each other . . . I know. . . .'

The bed creaked and, on reaching out one yearning hand, Will touched skin like sun-warmed satin.

The next morning, when she picked up the wispy panties from the floor where they had been tossed in flattering haste, a scrap of paper dropped from the black nylon.

Wondering, Will picked it up. It was a newspaper clipping. Someone had written in the margin, in a tiny, flowing script: 'A gratuity from the grateful (up to $1.98) God Eep.'

The clipping itself, a mere filler, read: 'At present prices, the value of the chemical compounds which make up the human body is only $1.98.'

The Other Side

DR CRAIG CAME UPON the set of incantations through a fortunate accident. He had just returned from an irritating Saturday session in the basement of his old wooden house, where he was waging a weekend war with the termites. No doubt it was his concentration upon the minute evidence of insect damage that made him notice the similar deterioration of the leather cover of Castrucci's *Commentaries* (Cologne, 1479).

On examining the damage, he was amazed and delighted to find hidden in the binding a sheaf of parchment, closely scribbled by some unknown penman of the fifteenth century. Deciphering the crabbed dog-Latin was a routine matter for Craig, a paleographer of much experience, Head of the Department of Medieval History of Bateman College.

The incantations aroused his interest at once, partly because of the dry, under-emphasized manner in which the writer cited details of his experiments. More convincing, however, was his complaint that since employment of the sorcery depended upon the possession of an exact likeness of the subject, he was ever at the mercy of those few disreputable artists whom he hired to depict his enemies. Unfortunately, it was seldom indeed that the portraits were good enough to implement the spells; and, in addition, the author did not dare ask the painters to portray the great nobles he most desired to harass. The penalties against witchcraft in medieval Europe were far too terrible to risk betrayal.

Since anyone reading the manuscript was bound to think of his own enemies, Dr Craig's thoughts turned immediately to Professor Randall. Although ten years younger than Craig, he had long surpassed him in his chosen field. Starting as his junior at Bateman, Randall had quickly earned equal rank, and then accepted a position at Midwestern University. From there he had published one brilliant monograph after another, and now, while Craig stagnated at Bateman, he was Chairman

of the whole Humanities Division at Midwestern, with its 15,000 students and enormous endowment.

As if to salt these wounds, Professor Randall's latest paper had pitilessly demolished Craig's life work, his massive *History of the First Crusade*, exposing, with detailed evidence, the poor documentation, anti-clerical bias, and shaky generalizations of the writer.

Ironically enough, Randall had suggested that Craig seemed to think like a twelfth century man—that he had a medieval mind. There was nothing in his dry, rigorous analysis more to the point, had he but known it.

For almost an hour Dr Craig pored over the sheets of parchment. There were incantations for tormenting one's foes, and also for destroying them utterly in various nasty ways. There were others to make a helpless leman of any woman; and a particularly involved one that might, if properly handled, devastate a city. And all of these depended primarily upon the exact likeness the anonymous writer had found it so difficult to acquire.

When he had learned enough to content him, Craig rose, and going to his study, brought back a recent issue of the *Journal of Medieval History*. The frontispiece was an excellent full-length photograph of the publication's new editor, Professor Walter Randall. On the back, in a neat box, was a summary of his scholarly career.

A crooked smile touched Craig's mouth. There was nothing to lose by trying, he reflected. Modern researches on psychosomatic medicine, the Rhine experiments, and many other off-trail investigations, implied to any impartial philosopher the essential truth of Hamlet's remark to Horatio. 'There *are* more things in heaven and earth,' Craig murmured; 'and this could be one of them.' He fetched a pair of scissors and went to work.

After pasting the portrait of Randall to a sheet of stiff cardboard, he cut around the likeness, paper-doll fashion, snipping with the utmost care. An exact likeness, the writer had stressed; well, twentieth century photography had solved that problem perfectly.

It was now time for the actual words of power. This being Saturday, with no classes in session, Randall would be at home. No doubt he was busy in his study—perhaps another mordant critique would soon appear in print. Not unless it was already in the mail, Craig told himself hopefully. Then he leaned the stiffened portrait upright against an inkwell and stared at it.

'So, Randall,' he said pleasantly. 'You accuse me of having a medieval

mind. That is the only statement in your sophistical attack that I can accept. In fact, I propose to demonstrate its accuracy right now, much to your disadvantage.

And speaking in a low, carefully modulated voice, he made the necessary incantation.

When the last ringing words had been pronounced, Craig relaxed visibly, and humming, went to the bathroom, where he found a fever thermometer. He brought the instrument to the table, placing it first at the figure's base, then, with a frown, erect against the cardboard. He thought the arrangement amusing, and smiled faintly.

'Like a walking stick, almost,' he mused aloud. 'Ph.D. with glass walking stick—how very avant-garde! What would my unknown necromancer say to that, I wonder?'

There was a heat lamp on the sideboard. He carried it over to the table, put in the plug, and directed the burnished copper reflector towards the puppet. When, in five minutes, a reading of the thermometer showed 103 degrees, he moved the model back several inches, replacing the instrument after shaking it down. The temperature quickly dropped to 100; he split the difference, advancing the cardboard likeness halfway to its first position. Finally the mercury column stood fast at 102.4. Dr Craig nodded approval, and sat down with the *Commentaries*, savouring the spicy gossip of the Venetian.

Half an hour later he went to the phone. 'Hello,' he said in jovial tones. 'Joan? This is Irwin—Irwin Craig. No, I don't blame you for not remembering my voice; we've been out of touch rather long. I wanted a few words with Walter. What? Taken suddenly ill—why that's dreadful. I know what you're thinking; we've had our—ah—scholarly differences, but there are too few good medievalists like your husband—really; that's quite a fever, 102.4. You've an accurate thermometer, I see. Oh, nothing. Just give Walter my regards, and I'll call again later to see how he is.' He replaced the handset, and sat there for several seconds, his eyes bright.

Then he smacked his left palm with his right fist.

'By Heaven!' he said softly. 'By Heaven—it works! The damn thing really works—and in 1961!'

For two more hours, as the little image baked, he sat there, deep in megalomaniac daydreams. The clock ticked solemnly; the big volume lay closed on his lap. At length he put the book aside, snapped off the heat lamp, and sighed.

'Randall,' he said, 'your fever is going, going—gone! Dear Joan will

be so happy; there is mercy in the universe after all.' Smiling unpleasantly, he shook down the thermometer and put it away.

'Now,' he breathed, 'what's next for our distinguished scholar?' With a bland, seraphic expression on his face, he reached into the messy kitchen cupboard, bringing out a large wire strainer. This he inverted over the figurine, so that it looked pathetically like a caged Lilliputian. 'I wonder,' he remarked, 'if this gives him a trapped feeling to begin with. Probably not, but in these matters who can say? Just think of the lines of research—bah! I'm free of all that now.'

He went to the refrigerator, and returned with a single ice-cube, which he placed on top of the strainer, directly over the thin, cardboard form. The beautiful simplicity of the arrangement obviously pleased him; he chuckled softly, watching.

A single drop of icy water, gleaming in the late afternoon sun, splashed on the tiny, defenseless head. It was followed soon by others, coming faster and faster. A miniature pool of chilly water formed at the figurine's feet.

'Most refreshing for him, just after fever,' Craig laughed, heading for the phone.

'Hello,' he said gravely, his voice full of concern. 'Yes, Irwin again. Chills? And cold sweat? Isn't that rather unusual? What sort of illness——? Doesn't know, eh. A doctor ought to have some idea. Over in a few days—yes, if it *is* a virus. How long does it take an ice-cube to melt? Many minutes—more than you'd think; but not days. Sorry, I was thinking of something else. I'll check back later; I'm quite worried about him. No, really I am. Goodbye.'

When the ice-cube had vanished, Craig eyed the model thoughtfully, then placed it flat upon the table, face up. Reaching into his pocket, he took out a handful of change, and separated the cents from the other coins. There were fifteen. With his thick but facile fingers he picked up a single penny and set it neatly on the centre of the puppet's chest. Then he sat down, his gaze on the clock.

After five minutes, he put a second coin directly on top of the first. 'Ironical,' he said. 'The damn fool's never cared a hand what they paid him; lives just for those researches of his.' Craig's lips narrowed. 'Well, these few pennies will weigh on him, all right.'

Thirty-five minutes later, when there was a column of eight coins crushing the small chest, he made a final call.

'Is that a fact?' he exclaimed. 'Can't seem to breathe, but no lung congestion. An oxygen tent; very wise. It must be something like a—

ah—weight on his chest, I should think. Just a lucky guess; I know nothing about medicine. Oh yes, I quite understand you're too busy for me. Sorry you think I'm insincere, but I shan't trouble you again—by phone. Tell my poor colleague I'm thinking about him—thinking hard, I assure you. I've never heard you cry before, Joan. All right; goodbye.'

As he hung up, there was a soft thump at the door. The evening paper had arrived. More from habit than because of any marked interest, he went out after it. Two patrol cars raced by, their sirens wailing, and Craig winced. Now that so much was within his grasp, he'd have to get away from this shabby noisy neighbourhood.

Back inside, he took a casual glance at the front page. There, clad in a revealing swim suit, a delectable young lady dominated the news. 'Miss Universe—the Most Beautiful Girl in the World.'

For a moment, as any man might, Dr Craig studied the half-tone. It was unusually sharp for a newsprint photo, and surely a fine likeness. The instant that phrase entered his mind, the professor stiffened.

Craig had never been very successful with women. There was something in his cold, almost reptilian nature, with its undercurrent of cruelty, that repelled all but the most insensitive. When younger, he had courted a series of desirable girls, only to be rejected by each in turn. Finally, unwilling to risk his professional career by associating with more complaisant types, he had withdrawn into a solitary, brooding celibacy.

But now, with the teasing picture before his eyes, and the old manuscript's Latin about 'unwilling lemans' whispering at the dark edge of his brain, Craig felt a sudden surge of resentful passion.

A re-examination of the parchment made it clear that bringing a reluctant woman to one's side was a somewhat more difficult matter than tormenting an enemy. It would take several hours; there was a ritual in addition to a mere incantation—a repulsive and debilitating one, involving the dismemberment of a cat. Nevertheless the game ought to be worth the candle, since the manuscript had already proved reliable.

To save time, he decided not to cut out and mount the picture. Very probably that was a needless preliminary. A likeness was just that, and not necessarily a puppet. If it didn't work, he could revert to the previous method.

Snatching the scissors, he quickly snipped out the large rectangle with the half-tone of Miss Universe. A hasty perusal of the paper showed that the nineteen year old co-ed from Georgia was staying at the Gaylord Hotel, some fifteen miles from his house. It was a little

queer to note in the manuscript that time must be allowed for the woman to make the compulsive journey. In the twelfth century that meant a horse, or, in a few cases, some sort of coach. In these days, there was no reason why the girl couldn't quietly leave her room, take a cab, and be with Craig in less than an hour. Well and good. He braced himself for the ordeal ahead. First his neighbour's old tom cat, dozing, no doubt, as usual, on top of the cellar door. . . .

It was after eleven at night when the professor finished the tiring ritual which preceded the incantation. But before completing the last step, he swept the coins from the figurine's chest.

'Don't want you to die—yet,' he said. 'I'll give you another dose tomorrow—if I have strength enough to get out of bed!' According to the parchment, the picture was sensitized for only three days, and before it became mere paper again, he'd see that Randall was thoroughly dead. Of course, if he died himself, the spell would end, but Craig had never felt better. . . .

Then he recited the sonorous Latin phrases, washed off the cat's blood, mixed himself a stiff Martini, and went to bed. As a minor titillation, he pinned the newspaper picture of his intended victim against the wall just above his pillow, after which he stretched out in the warm darkness to wait, all a-tingle.

How would it be? The girl had to come; was bound to submit. Would she be conscious of the compulsion, and fight it? The manuscript implied she'd be hopelessly infatuated, acting according to her nature when in that state. It was an intriguing problem, but his thoughts returned to Randall. What was the best way to finish him off? He dwelled with pleasure on certain peculiarly medieval tortures; so few people understood just what it meant to be drawn and quartered, for example. Much more horrible than they dreamed. . . .

The old walls creaked as the damp, cool night air bathed them, and he scowled, thinking of his losing battle with the termites. Termites! Slowly a feral smile curled his lips. The puppet was made of paper and cardboard. What if—just suppose—he thrust it deep into the powdered wood and other debris of insects? What symptoms then, when hundreds of tiny jaws began gnawing? The very thing; he'd do it in the morning. Maybe with Miss Universe at his side. A first stage before (he hesitated to dare the thought) the world.

At that moment he heard the front door, deliberately left unlocked, open, and tensed under the cover as a thrill of exultation shook him. A surprisingly quick trip. Perhaps she'd had her own car handy. He hoped

she wouldn't have a chauffeur waiting outside; it might be awkward. Not that he cared a damn about her reputation. Why should he, now that he was master of the world in terms of its leaders.

There was a sound of footsteps down the long, dark corridor—uncertain, heavy ones. Craig felt uneasy. Surely no slender young girl would walk like that. Filled with vague fears, he fumbled for the light switch on the wall above his pillow. As it clicked on, the pin-up, brushed by his fingers, fluttered to the blanket, face down. There, on the back, he saw a bestial, pitiably uncomprehending face, and underneath the caption:

MAD STRANGLER AT LARGE!
Must Kill Where He Loves,
Says Psychiatrist.

Still bewildered, Craig turned the clipping mechanically from one side to the other: Mad Strangler to Miss Universe. Abruptly there flashed into his mind the recollection of those police cars careening by some hours earlier. It dawned on him now with terrible finality that the killer must have been hiding relatively near, while the girl's hotel was miles away. In sensitizing one side, he had unwittingly done so to the other side.

Then the bedroom door slammed open, and Craig's first leman, his animal face stubbled, his eyes wild, shambled in with outstretched arms.

The madman was drooling with possessive love.

In the Tomb

STRETCHED OUT AT FULL LENGTH in the damp tunnel, Bull gave the pick-mattock a savage thrust into the tough loam and left it there, dropping to his elbows.

'Gotta rest,' he gasped. 'I'm pooped.'

Behind him the Professor groaned. 'Again?' he protested. 'You just had a break. We should be in the tomb by now.'

'If you think diggin' lyin' down is easy, try it yourself,' Bull growled. 'I'll hold the light for a change. Thought you said there wasn't much more t'do. Damn stuff's like rubber an' full o' roots.'

'That's right, there isn't. When Kavanaugh and I left it, there couldn't have been over eight feet to go. After all, I'm supplying the brains, so you can give with the strong back.'

'You've got brains enough,' Bull admitted grudgingly, 'but also luck. Suppose somebody'd found this here tunnel while you was doin' time.'

'Still brains—not luck. Even though Kavanaugh and I were coming back the next night, I made him hide the opening very carefully. So when the cops picked me up on that old rap, I knew the tunnel would be safe. You've always got to think of every little thing ahead of time. That's how to stay on top.'

'You've been down for five years, don't forget. Way down—in stir.'

'A slip,' the Professor said airily. 'Everybody's entitled to just one. My first and last. With this haul, I'm through. Me for the straight and narrow. With a hundred grand or so, giving up crime is easy, right? May even become some kind of an engineer. I didn't waste those five years at Q. Always was good at figures.'

'Specially women's.'

'Sure, why not. And lucky for you. If I hadn't told you and Krause about my juicier love affairs, you guys would've gone stir-crazy that first year—when a man can't read, or think, or even look intelligent. One thing, Bull, I have to give you, though: you're a good listener. Too bad

nothing ever sinks in. What's the time? You took your watch.' He chuckled. 'And it won't be worth much after wearing it through all this muck. That's why I didn't bring mine. Foresight again, Bull.'

'Lemme see. Only two-thirty. An' I'm still waitin' t'find out the score. You ain't told me very much so far except how hard t'dig.'

'Good idea. Better get going. I'll fill you in meanwhile—in words of one syllable or less.'

Bull sighed, but seized the pick again. As the Professor held the flashlight steady, the big man pecked away at the stringy soil, his great shoulder muscles flexing in rhythm.

'I don't see why we couldn't break into the vault above ground,' he complained. 'Where's a safer place t'work than a graveyard at night?'

'Not this one,' the Professor said. 'It's class. Got day and night watchmen, and a coupla tiger-sized Alsatian dogs. I know. Besides, there isn't any vault on the surface. They just built a big concrete box, like a deep basement, with stairs going down. Then, after he was in, they covered the whole business with a monument like the Hoover Dam. It would take the Army Engineers a week to get through from the top, believe me.'

'Well, it's a rough job,' Bull panted, wiping his forehead with a hairy wrist. 'No room t'swing. Hey—suppose the old guy ain't even wearin' the stuff?'

'Don't worry; he is. Kavanaugh used to work for Ruhig; he knows the set-up. They definitely planted all his jewellery with him, and he had plenty, I can tell you. And it won't even be hot, because nobody will have any idea the stuff is gone. It's absolutely perfect. When you rob the dead, nobody loses; nobody knows.'

'Musta been nuts, buryin' all that. Why'n't he leave it t' his family?'

'Don't cry about them,' the Professor said sourly. 'They split about four million bucks.' He spat. 'Some people sure get the breaks.'

'They got a daughter?' Bull asked. 'You might still muscle in.'

'No.' The Professor was brusque. Was the big ox actually trying to rib him? That would be something new.

'Too bad. A ladies' man like you——'

'Dig, Bull; don't talk. I'll do that. Which reminds me—what's your real name, anyway? You never told me.'

'You never asked. Seems like you done all the talkin'—about you. But it don't matter: I ain't used my real name in a long time. My family's had trouble enough wit'out hearin' about me.' His pick rebounded with a loud click, and Bull swore. 'If that's another damn rock——!'

'Rock? Let me see.' The Professor squeezed his skinny body alongside. 'That's it, Bull. The concrete. We've hit the vault. Good sighting job on my part. Me for engineering, all right.'

'Hell! The vault, you say. I ain't sure that's anythin' t'cheer about. How thick is it?'

'Only about four inches, I think. You'll knock a hole through in no time.'

'Easy for you t' talk. The flashlight strainin' your wrist yet?'

'Aw, quit griping. How else could you make ten grand in one night? They're not paying that kind of dough for beef without brains—and to ex-cons, too. I can picture you even going near a tomb at night by yourself! You've been lucky as it is. You saw where Kavanaugh and I had to shore-up about twenty feet back there with boards. That's real work. The only spot where a bad cave-in could happen, perish the thought. We'd never get out. But here you've got easy digging, just like cheese.'

Bull grunted sceptically, but continued to chip away at the stained concrete. 'What d'ya figger his stuff's worth?'

'Well,' the Professor said, 'you must have heard about Ruhig. He liked to be called "The Man Who Never Slept". Stealing the old Edison line. Claimed he walked the floor all night out-guessing the stock market. Maybe he did; the money rolled in, that's for sure. He wore six rings on each hand, all loaded with big diamonds. Tie-pin with a ruby that set him back fifteen Gs, when that was real dough. Then he takes the super special wrist-watch his wife bought him—one of those waterproof, shock-proof, earthquake-proof, self-winding jobs: you know, the kind that keeps going for ever as long as you move your hand a few times a day—and has a fortune in extra gold and ice stuck on it. They buried him with all the jewellery, isn't that the damndest thing you ever heard? The family didn't let out a peep; he had 'em under his thumb dead or alive. Must have been a sight either way, the old——! How's the concrete?'

'Hole's almost big enough right now. What happens next?'

'What do you think, stupid? We go in. Then we grab all the fancy rings and stuff. Since I didn't bring a watch, I claim that. You'll get your cut from the rest.'

'Ya mean you'd *wear* a dead man's stuff!'

'Damn right. I won't sell that. Everything else, yes.'

'How's this? My hands're blistered t' hell.'

The Professor peered at the black hole.

'That ought to about do it. Kavanaugh said the coffin's right in the

middle of the mausoleum, on a sort of platform. Solid gold handles; we might as well take those, too.'

'An' just how do we crash this here mauso— what d'ya call it?'

'You're doing that right now, musclehead.'

'Oh, you mean the vault. Why'n't you say so, then?' He stopped swinging and wormed back a little. 'Jeez! You mean right through this hole's the coffin?'

'It better be, or you've done a lot of digging for nothing. And me a lot of brainwork, which is harder.'

'How long since the old man died?'

'Almost six years. If I hadn't drawn that fiver, I'd 've cleaned this place out before he was cold.'

'Look,' Bull said gruffly, 'the hole's wide enough for you already, an' I'd rather not——'

The Professor's laugh was insulting, and the other winced. 'By God, you're scared!' he jeered. 'Two hundred and twenty pounds of muscle, and he wants me to go first.'

'I ain't exactly scared,' Bull objected unconvincingly, 'but like I always said, messin' with dead bodies is bad luck.'

'Urrgh! You sound just like that Polack broad I told you about in stir. She was always sounding off about omens, religion, and such tripe. "Cracked Kracowski", I used to call that dame. What did you say?'

'Nothin',' Bull mumbled. Then after a moment's silence: 'That the little blonde girl you dumped in Chicago—without a dime?'

'That's the babe, all right. You listen better than I thought. Yeah, I hadn't any dough to spare. Did I tell you how she actually tried to pick me up two years later on West Madison Street? I swear you could hardly recognize her—she looked terrible. When she recognized me, I had a time getting away. She wanted money to go home. Ohio or somewhere. I made up a phone number fast and told her to give me a ring next day; that I'd get some dough. But keep after that concrete, will you, Bull? You can work and still listen, damn it. We've got to be away from here by dawn.'

'First you tell me the hole's big enough, an' then you want more. Well, it's big enough for you, an' I ain't crawling into no vault wit' no dead body. I did all the diggin'; you can go in an' get the stuff.'

'Suits me,' the Professor grinned. 'Here, take this light, and I'll see about squeezing through. After I'm in, give it to me; you won't need it out here. Wait, though; let me flash it around, and see how things look.' He thrust the light into the ragged gap and peered down. 'Yeah, floor

about three feet below us, and there's the coffin, all right, just like Kavanaugh said. Careless job; look how off-centre it is on the platform. Big vault, sure enough. Plenty of room for Ruhig to walk the floor nights! But I guess you're in no mood for humour right now, Bull. You act sick. What a superstitious mutt you are! Live men are the only dangerous ones; remember that. Well, here I go.'

He handed back the flashlight and, grunting and squirming, forced his slight body halfway through. 'Better chip out a little more while I'm down there,' he ordered. 'Damn tight fit; my belt's caught. Ah!' Finally his narrow shoulders scraped past, and he stood on the dusty floor. Bending, he turned a smeared face towards Bull, and snapped: 'The light, stupid—give it here. What're you waiting for—Christmas?'

Bull's dark, heavy-jowled face was framed in the opening. He looked down at the Professor, turning the beam on his sharp features.

'That Kracowski girl,' he said thickly. 'Her first name "Stella"?'

The other gaped at him, blinking.

'Yeah——' he said, and broke off. 'What the devil you pestering me with silly questions now for?' His face whitened suddenly. 'Bull!' he exclaimed. 'You're not——?'

'My name's Kracowski,' Bull grated, his jaw muscles knotting. 'She was my kid sister. We never even knew she—and you—it killed my mother—my little Stella!' he groaned, half to himself.

'Bull!' the Professor cried, his voice shaking. 'Let me explain. . . .'

The face was withdrawn; there were scuffling sounds. The Professor waited, teeth bared, one hand on his open switch-blade knife. What was the big gorilla up to? For a second he'd expected to find those thick hands reaching for him; but then he'd remembered that the opening was much too small for Bull's huge frame. Maybe the fool was going to yell copper; scuttle them both to have his revenge.

'Bull!' he hissed, unwilling to raise his voice again. 'Your dough—ten grand! Come back, you crazy fool!'

Then he heard wood splintering and a low rumble. 'My God!' he gulped. 'He's collapsed the tunnel on me!'

For the first time, now, he became aware of the crushing blackness, the silence, the chill damp and, not five feet away, the platform with its burden. His quick mind was racing as he fought for self-control. 'Take it easy,' he muttered. 'No panic. You're all right if you don't panic. Use those brains you've been bragging about.' What were the angles? Dig out? Impossible; it would take days to get through the caved-in section with nothing but a lousy knife. Wait a minute. He couldn't get very far

horizontally, but once in the uncollapsed part of the tunnel, right outside the vault, maybe by digging up to the surface of the ground. . . . But he was at least twelve feet down, and the soil might fall in on him; he'd be smothered in the narrow shaft. Besides, wasn't there an apron of concrete around the monument? Suppose he ran into that?

'Relax,' he said aloud, his voice a little shrill. Its hollow sound startled him, and he spoke no more. He thought: 'I'll hammer on the walls with something. The vibration will carry. There's the dogs—they'll hear me and act up. In a day or two at most somebody's bound to catch on. The air should last that long; some must be filtering through the tunnel right now.

But it was awfully dark. He felt in his pockets. No matches; one penalty for being a non-smoker. The candy bars were there, though. Good. He'd ration them. So much every few hours, and—damn! Not even a way to tell time.

But the Professor would pull through; always had. He'd get a short term for grave-robbing—attempting, actually. They couldn't give you much for that. It would be a relief if the cops came. Maybe Bull was tipping them off anonymously. No, not much chance of that. Stupid as he was, he'd know that his enemy was trapped; would expect him to die down here. Ah, it was a bum break all round. If he'd only kept his mouth shut about that Kracowski tramp—a hundred grand or more down the drain, and for what? Hell!

He looked about, trying to pierce the almost tangible blackness, but it pressed right up against his skin, making him fight the irrational urge to brush it aside like a gauzy obstruction.

Suddenly he heard something stir and stiffened. His lips worked stickily. It must be—had to be—a mouse. Or nothing; just nerves. How could a mouse get into a concrete vault? And then, standing there, on the knife-edge of hysteria, he heard, coming from the centre dais, a sound that seemed to fill the whole musty tomb. As it grew louder, he recognized a familiar rhythm.

It was the ticking of a watch.

Puddle

A GREAT POET promised to show us fear in a handful of dust. If ever I doubted that such a thing were possible, I know better now. In the past few weeks a vague, terrible memory of my childhood suddenly came into sharp focus after staying tantalizingly just beyond the edge of recall for decades. Perhaps the high fever from a recent virus attack opened some blocked pathways in my brain, but whatever the explanation, I have come to understand for the first time why I see fear not in dust, but water.

It must seem quite absurd: fear in a shallow puddle made by rain; but think about it for a moment. Haven't you ever, as a child, gazed down at such a little pool on the street, seen the reflected sky, and experienced the illusion, very strongly, so that it brought a shudder, of endless depth a mere step away—a chasm extending downward somehow to the heavens? A single stride to the centre of the glassy puddle, and you would fall right through. Down? Up? The direction was indefinable, a weird blend of both. There were clouds beneath your feet, and nothing but that shining surface between. Did you dare to take that critical step and shatter the illusion? Not I. Now that memory has returned, I recall being far too scared of the consequences. I carefully skirted such wet patches, no matter how casually my playmates splashed through.

Most of my acquaintances tolerated this weakness in me. After all, I was a sturdy, active child, and held my own in the games we played. It was only after Joe Carma appeared in town that my own little hell materialized, and I lost status.

He was three years older than I, and much stronger; thickset, muscular, dark—and perpetually surly. He was never known to smile in any joyous way, but only to laugh with a kind of *schadenfreude*, the German word for mirth provoked by another's misfortunes. Few could stand up to him when he hunched his blocky frame and bored in with big fists

flailing, and I wasn't one of the elect; he terrified me as much by his demeanour as his physical power.

Looking back now, I discern something grim and evil about the boy, fatherless, with a weak and querulous mother. What he did was not the thoughtless, basically merry mischief of the other kids, but full of malice and cruelty. Where Shorty Dugan would cheerfully snowball a tomcat, or let the air out of old man Gruber's tyres, Carma preferred to torture a kitten—rumour said he'd been seen burning one alive—or take a hammer to a car's headlights.

Somehow Joe Carma learned of my phobia about puddles, and my torment began. On several occasions he meant to go so far as to collar me, hold my writhing body over one of the bigger pools, and pretend to drop me through—into that terribly distant sky beyond the sidewalk.

Each time I was saved at the last moment, nearly hysterical with fright, by Larry Dumont, who was taller than the bully, at least as strong, and thought to be more agile. They were bound to clash eventually, but so far Carma had sheered off, hoping, perhaps, to find and exploit some weakness in his opponent that would give him an edge. Not that he was a coward but just coldly careful; one who always played the odds.

As for Larry, he was good-natured, and not likely to fight at all unless pushed into it. By grabbing Carma with his lean, wiry fingers that could bend thick nails, and half-jokingly arguing with him, Dumont would bring about my release without forcing a showdown. Then they might scuffle a bit, with Larry smiling and Joe darkly sullen as ever, only to separate, newly respectful of each other's strength.

One day, after a heavy rain, Carma caught me near a giant puddle—almost a pond—that had appeared behind the Johnson barn at the north end of the town. It was a lonely spot, the hour was rather early, and ordinarily Joe would not have been about, as he liked to sleep late on weekends. If I had suspected he might be around, that was the last place in the world I'd have picked to visit alone.

Fear and fascination often go together. I stood by the huge puddle, but well away from the edge, peering down at the blue sky, quite cloudless and so far beneath the ground where it should not have been at all; and for the thousandth time tried to gather enough nerve to step in. I *knew* there had to be solid land below—jabs with a stick had proved this much before in similar cases—yet I simply could not make my feet move.

At that instant brawny arms seized me, lifted my body into the air,

and tilted it so that my contorted face was parallel to the pool and right over the glittering surface.

'Gonna count to ten, and then drop you right through!' a rasping voice taunted me. 'You been right all along: it's a long way down. You're gonna fall and fall, with the wind whistling past your ears; turning, tumbling, faster and faster. You'll be gone for good, kid, just sailing down forever. You're gonna scream like crazy all the way, and it'll get fainter and fainter. Here we go: one! two! three!——'

I tried to scream but my throat was sealed. I just made husky noises while squirming desperately, but Carma held me fast. I could feel the heavy muscles in his arms all knotted with the effort.

'—four! five! Won't be long now. Six! seven!——'

A thin, whimpering sound broke from my lips, and he laughed. My vision was blurring; I was going into shock, it seems to me now, years later.

Then help came, swift and effective. Carma was jerked back, away from the water, and I fell free. Larry Dumont stood there, white with fury.

'You're a dirty skunk, Joe!' he gritted angrily. 'You need a lesson, your own kind.'

Then he did an amazing thing. Although Carma was heavier than he, if shorter, Larry whipped those lean arms around the bully, snatched him clear of the ground, and with a single magnificent heave threw him fully six feet into the middle of the water.

Now I wonder about my own story; I have to. Did I actually see what I now recall so clearly? It's quite impossible, but the vision persists. Carma fell full-length, face-down, in the puddle, and surely the water could not have been more than a few inches deep. But he went on through! I saw his body, twisting, turning, and shrinking in size as it dropped away into that cloudless sky. He screamed, and it was exactly as he had described it to me moments earlier. The terrible, shrill cries grew fainter, as if dying away in the distance; the flailing figure became first a tiny doll, and then a mere dot; an unforgettable thing, surely, yet only a dream-memory for so long.

I looked at Larry; he was gaping, his face drained of all blood. His long fingers were still hooked and tense from that mighty toss.

That's how I remember it. Perhaps we probed the puddle; I'm not sure, but if we did, surely it was inches deep.

On recovering from my illness three weeks ago, I hired a good private detective to make a check. The files of the local paper are

unfortunately not complete, but one item for August 20, 1937, when I was eight, begins:

> NO CLUES ON DISAPPEARANCE OF CARMA BOY
>
> After ten days of police investigation, no trace has been found of Joe Carma, who vanished completely on the ninth of this month. It is not even known how he left town, if he did, since there is no evidence that he went by either bus or train. Martin's Pond, the only deep water within many miles, was dragged, but without any result.

The detective assures me that Joe Carma never returned to town, and that his name is unlisted in Army records, with the FBI, or, indeed, any national roster from 1937 to date.

These days, I skin dive, sail my own little sloop, and have even shot some of the worst Colorado River rapids in a rubber boat. Yet it still takes almost more courage than I have to slosh through a shallow puddle that mirrors the sky.

The Fanatical Ford

'Fords is the worst,' the old man quavered, fixing the reporter with an indignant eye of watery blue. 'They stick together like—like them hillbillies that are all relatives, even though they're scattered to hell and gone over Kentucky. You be sure to put that down, young man: the others is bad, but them Fords is the worst. Family pride, by God!'

The reporter nodded, scribbling expert shorthand in his notebook. Quite a character, this old boy. A brand new approach to insanity. Too bad this wasn't a TV assignment; it would be nice to get a salty tape of that voice. Reminded him of Walter Brennan.

He wrote: 'Fred Marer, a leather-faced, gimlet-eyed veteran, is being persecuted——' No. Better: '—claims to be a victim of the oddest persecution——'

Marer broke into this train of thought. 'I know just how it started. Back in 1913, it was. Before you were born, likely. I made my Pa's Model T real mad. I was only a kid then, but I had a nasty mouth—— You getting all this?'

'You bet I am, Mr Marer. It's a remarkable story.'

'And a whole pack of lies, you're thinking,' the old man said shrewdly.

'It's not my business to decide that,' the reporter replied in a bland voice. 'I just report the facts. There may be good reason for your belief. Now, about this Model T you—ah—antagonized. I didn't know'—he smiled—'that they were so touchy. My grandfather called his names any decent mule wouldn't have tolerated. Once, I remember he even gave it a good boot in the radiator. About a quart of bolts and things flew off, but that didn't seem to matter; the car still ran—when it had a mind to.' He paused, flushing. He was talking too much, and personalizing the old car as foolishly as Marer.

'That's right,' the hermit agreed ruefully. 'They wasn't easy to insult.

Not a whole lot of pride when you're turned out on an assembly line. Not like a Rolls. But you see, Mr—ah——'

'Nelson.'

'—Nelson—most people abused their Fords in a kinda half affectionate way. Oh, the owners got mad enough—stuck in mud, or engine dead on a cold morning, or gears wouldn't mesh—but it was like quarrelling between husband and wife. When they really love each other, it doesn't go deep and fester. But I had a lippy mouth, and maybe too it was one of these here natural enemy things. I'd had my heart set on a bigger, better car, and took it out on this one.

'Don't ask me what I said, because it's too far back. Wasn't one thing, anyhow—more the last straw in a heap of insults. Know when it happened, though. I was cranking her one cold morning—real winters there; not like California—and she just wouldn't start.'

'Why "she"?'

'Dunno. But it was a "she" all right. Nobody can hold a grudge like a female. You know about a woman scorned; you ain't that young, I reckon. Anyhow, like I'm saying, you remember—guess you wouldn't, a kid like you—how a Model T'd go "er-rah! er-rah! er-er-er!" when she was cranked. A sort of sneer it seemed that morning, with me late for work and colder'n Eskimo's nose in Alaska.' He paused to spit reflectively. Overhead two ravens flapped, calling harshly; and high above the clouds there was the hissing scream of a jet cargo plane, Los Angeles bound.

'It was something in her tone that riled me up, and I cussed her out good. And that wasn't all. I hauled off and hit her a terrible clout with the jack handle. Made a big dent in the hood, and just ruined a headlight. Knocked it out of kilter.' He nodded knowingly. 'That Model T never looked right again. She was like a purty gal with a cast in one eye. When you spoil a woman's looks, watch out—that's all! After all our other fighting, this was the finish. She really hated me. And it wasn't just her; she passed the word along. Them Fords was like a family, and stuck together. You hurt one, you hurt 'em all. It was as if I'd belted the whole cussed tribe, instead of just one female. And that wasn't all; the other cars—different makes—joined in soon enough. Maybe an Olds didn't like a Ford, but I was a common enemy to 'em all.'

'When was the first—ah—attack?'

'Why, that there very Model T tried to kill me a dozen times before we got rid of her. Once I started to crank her up and, mind you, I *know* she was in neutral. But the minute she turned over, she got into gear

somehow. I jumped aside just in time. Damned if she didn't chase me over a field, turning when I did. And the proof is that when I jumped a gully, instead of her going on, like a car would if it was really out of control, she stopped and went back to neutral. *She* wasn't a-going to smash herself up! Doesn't that prove it?' he demanded belligerently. 'No car that ain't chuck full of spite behaves that way.'

'Sounds reasonable,' Nelson agreed, wooden-faced.

'Well, I finally persuaded my dad to sell the car. Then we bought an Olds. And it was just as bad. Nothing merry about that durned heap. Twice it backed up on me sudden-like when Pa was driving. He swore he didn't touch the reverse, and I believe him. Pa was a good driver. Naturally, I wouldn't ride in the thing at all after that, but it was always trying to get me anyhow by backing, swerving, or speeding up without no warning. Pa used to say I was a jinx—'cause that there Olds didn't act normal when I was around. You just bet it didn't! I tried to tell him about how I was in bad with Fords, and how they was pizening the other cars against me, but Pa just laughed. Ma kinda believed me—she was afraid of most machinery and hated to see horses disappear—but Pa never paid no mind to her.

'It got so I wasn't safe on the street. You saw them clippings. Does it seem natural to you that one man could have been in so many auto accidents? Looky here.' He thumbed a fistful of yellow papers. 'In 1920 I was almost killed three times by cars that just went wild, running up on sidewalks and things. Usually the driver had a clean record, too. I've had both legs broken eight times, my collar bone five, and ribs moren'n you can count. Here! In 1932 a dump truck that was parked by the kerb—no driver, even—suddenly let go with five tons of gravel. Cut my legs up something fierce. You should see the scars. Now if that don't show——'

'It's certainly a remark——' No; he'd said that once. 'Extremely interesting. What happened after that?'

'What d'you expect? Nothing but more of the same, and oftener, as cars increased. Buses, trucks, taxis—even a tractor, but it was too slow. They were all after me. And how about this, young feller? Twice the house I lived in was pretty near wrecked by big interstate trucks running wild off the highway. Bruises—the bed saved me the first time. And then a broken ankle. After that I stayed on the little back roads. Think that solved the problem? Not on your life! First thing you know there was motorcycles and jeeps.' He rubbed a thin, white scar on his stubbled chin. 'Fellow with a motorcycle did that in forty-five. Claimed

the machine went wild. *I* was a good fifty yards off the dirt road, hunting mushrooms. If it'd hit me square, I wouldn't be here. When that kid looked at his steering gear, wasn't a blamed thing wrong.'

'You must have collected a fortune in damages or insurance.'

'What if I did!' the old man flared. 'I had it coming, didn't I? Even if the drivers wasn't to blame, somebody had to pay my doctor bills. Why should I tell 'em it was the autos—them cussed Fords mostly—and not me. Who'd believe me? It's only my lawsuit money that lets me live in a safe place like this.' He waved one gnarled hand. From their bench outside the mountain cabin, they could see for miles over the rolling California hills, already seared by the dry summer. Nowhere another human to be seen—only a few sleek brown-and-white steers.

'Couldn't even get no insurance after a while,' the old man said querulously. 'So I'd just collect my damages. They tried to prove I was causing accidents deliberately, but most of the drivers was honest about it, and there was witnesses, anyhow. They always said how the cars went out of control.

'Then after they got to building them cars with the hoods like big mouths. They—what're you snickering at? Young whippersnapper—you don't——'

'Sorry,' Nelson said, gravely contrite. 'It wasn't at anything you said. Just reminded me of a cartoon. Please go on, Mr Marer; this is quite a story. I mean, quite fascinating. Valuable, too,' he added hastily.

The old man gave him a suspicious glance. 'I'm telling the gospel truth, exactly like it happened. Ain't nothing wrong with my memory. Right now I could tell you the serial number of the Model T that started the whole thing. And that there car musta been junked before you were born.' He paused triumpantly. 'Twelve thousand and twelve, it was—easy to remember.'

'One of the early ones, all right. But about those new hoods. You were saying——'

'Yeah, lemme tell you about that. You'd think I'd have the sense to keep away, but those cars looked so different. They didn't seem like the same tribe. No reason for *them* to carry on the grudge. That Model T had been rust for thirty years or more. After all that hiding out in the back country, I figured maybe them Fords had forgotten me.' He glowered into space, savouring his grievance. 'Damn hood snapped down just like big jaws. All I wanted was a little peek at the motor; hadn't seen one close up since twenty-nine.' His shoulders flexed

reminiscently. 'Lucky I had on a padded jacket. But my back ain't been right since.'

'What about foreign cars? You could have lived abroad.'

'That's what you think! Teach your grandmother to suck eggs. I tried that, just once. Took my $5000 damages when a motor scooter knocked me into a gully, and went to Europe for a year. In the first place, there's a lot of American cars there. They was made here, and got tipped off in the factory. The ones made in Europe, like the British Fords, soon caught on. It's a system like that there Mafia. They all hung together. I was chased by M.G.s, Jaguars, Dauphines, and Volkswagens. Sure, I could live in Ethiopia or Libya where there ain't but a few cars in the whole country, but I'd sooner take my chances.' He shook his head in disgust. 'They don't even pay good damages in Europe.'

'Well,' the reporter said, pocketing his notebook, 'you've finally licked the problem, I see. No car can get up here, that's for sure. But what do you do about supplies?'

'Mule pack up the trail. It's not too bad a walk, but nothing on wheels can make it.'

'And you've lived here—how long?'

'Eight years. I'm almost seventy. Down there I couldn't move fast enough for them new models. The 1953 bunch was bad enough! I ain't hankering to tangle with no 1960 Ford.'

'You're safe. Not even the new Army scout-cars could get up here. Seems to me you've won in the end.'

'I ain't so sure. Them Fords don't give up easy. They'll never rest till I'm dead. It was a Ford I insulted, and it's a Ford that'll kill me. But by God, at least it won't be a Model T—they ain't many of them around these days. You'll send me a copy of the paper—make it a couple?'

'Sure thing,' Nelson promised, knowing that he wouldn't. Better to forget than offend the old guy; and the old guy was certain to resent any objective treatment of his story. A typical paranoiac, but what an imagination!

'Now, if you'll let me take those pictures . . .' Nelson went to the gadget bag, and took out the press camera. 'On the bench first. That's it.'

The old man sat there stiffly erect, his wrinkled, tanned face sternly dignified. The reporter snapped the shutter with the easy confidence of a man who never doubts the quality of his negatives.

'Now let's do one with you shaking your fist as if—ah—cursing that Model T of yours.'

Marer looked doubtful. 'It'll make a silly picture,' he objected. 'You ain't got the right idea. This is a serious business.'

'Come on,' Nelson urged. 'You want people to hear your side of the thing, don't you? They seem to think you're either a clever insurance swindler or a bit—see what I mean? Look, if the photo's a little unfair, what of it? That makes people read your story, and that's what you're after.'

'All right,' Marer said reluctantly. 'Where'll I stand?'

'Right here in the clearing. Good. Now shake your fist. No, harder—up at the sky, like an angry prophet. That's the idea—hold it.'

He was just visualizing the caption: 'CURSES MODEL NEMESIS', when there was a whistling scream and an earth-jarring impact that flung him dazed to the hard ground. When he recovered his senses, some moments later, and shoved a heavy plank from his bruised body, he saw that where the old man had stood there lay a jumble of wood and metal fragments, many of them bloody.

It took him some time, shaken as he was, to identify their origin. The wood must have come from a large packing case; and the crumpled wheels, battered radiator, and assorted engine parts placed the contents. Above all, there was the famous old black, shiny finish on the metal.

He learned later that the reconditioned Model T was on its way by air cargo to Los Angeles, when it had fallen, in mysterious circumstances, through the hatch.

But what bothered him most was its serial number: twelve thousand and twelve.

The Grom

TAMERLANE, THE BIG tomcat, was seldom bored. He could lie for hours in the hot sun, chin on paws, watching with wise, slitted eyes. Human beings were always interesting, and in ten years he had learned much about their strange psychology. From his favourite vantage point on the stone window sill of the local bank, he studied the world about him. Sometimes his eyes closed briefly, but his perceptive ears remained alert, listening to all the varied, significant sounds that made up the pulse of Main Street.

But sophisticated as he was about mere humans and their odd habits, Tamerlane never failed to thrill at the sight of a grom.

The one coming down the street at this moment was unusually large, almost the size of a man. Squat, insolent, capricious in its movements, the smoky grom stalked along the sun-drenched sidewalk like a mad emperor abroad among his subjects.

Tamerlane stared with green, unwinking eyes, his tail tip lashing. A big grom like this one was bound to produce excitement somewhere in its course. The cat understood groms even better than humans. He had discovered early that people were completely unaware of a grom's presence. At first he had thought the humans merely indifferent, as some were to cats, but Tamerlane learned by experience. He would have understood groms sooner if they hadn't been scarce for so long. In this little town it was only during the last two or three years that groms had appeared in substantial numbers. The presence of the large, aggressive kind instead of the small, rather lackadaisical ones was a more recent phenomenon. Tamerlane would no longer bother with the little ones. He was too old and sybaritic to leave his comfortable sill for doubtful diversions.

But this one was a giant of its kind, and right now seemed obviously bound for some definite location. And that meant almost certain excite-

ment for an unobtrusive observer. A hoarse purr vibrated Tamerlane's throat.

Then a glint of subtle, feline amusement appeared in his vertical pupils. The grom had spotted the ladder in front of the hardware store. Few groms could resist a ladder leaning across the sidewalk against the wall of a building. Tamerlane vaguely believed that ladders were a sort of catnip for groms, at least in such a position. When they were placed otherwise, groms ignored them.

This one leaped joyously at the sight of it, reddish spots flecking the dusky bulk. Now the grom bounded forward, slipped under, and clinging to the inner side, swung exuberantly from the tenth rung. Like a swirl of oily fog it performed insane gymnastics over, under, and about the weather-beaten ladder. Ah! Tamerlane stiffened suddenly, his tail motionless. Here came a man, tall, self-assured, apparently certain of his place in the universe. Would he go through? The grom could reach him most readily if he did. But if the man shied away, going wide, as so many did, the grom might not bother with him.

Yes, he was going under, all right. He had glanced up to see if there were anyone on top, and finding the ladder unoccupied, went through, a sort of defiant cock to his head. Tamerlane stood up, his neck out-thrust. This part invariably fascinated him all the more because he couldn't quite understand either the grom's motives or its subtle technique. No matter how often it happened, the old cat seemed unable to observe clearly just what—there!

As the man passed under the ladder, the grom dropped squarely to his shoulders, and in a single lightning motion jammed one cloudy paw into the victim's head. For perhaps a tenth of a second Tamerlane saw the man's skull become murkily transparent as the grom made little patting strokes in the tender brain tissue.

At the same time, the excited cat could see mental images stirred into being by the subtle strokes. There was the kindly, placid face of a middle-aged woman, to begin with. But almost immediately it was replaced by a pretty, empty younger one, with provocative eyes. When the older woman's face re-formed a moment later, it had crumpled into a loathsome hag-visage, full of mawkish possessiveness. The whole scene was over almost instantly.

As on every other occasion, the cat tensed at the grom's attack, expecting to see the man resent this liberty taken with his person. Then he sank back, relaxed again. The same old story: the man strode along, blithely unconscious of the grom—now back on the ladder—and its

insolence. Indeed, he seemed a little proud of himself for some reason beyond Tamerlane's comprehension. It was hard to accept such indifference on the part of so arrogant a species. Encounters like this were responsible for Tamerlane's conviction that humans could not perceive groms. He knew, however, that the man would react to this tampering later, and in no pleasant fashion. His kind never escaped unscathed from such a meeting. A huge grom like this one had enormous power and used it ruthlessly when so inclined.

But now, like someone recalling a more urgent errand, the grom reluctantly left the ladder and proceeded down the street again, capering and bowing from side to side. Ears flattened, Tamerlane jumped lithely from his perch and skulked along behind, moving in calculated little streaking runs from one refuge point to another, never risking an extended advance in the open. The grom acknowledged his presence very obliquely, but ignored him otherwise. This was a trait of the species which Tamerlane approved. Like most cats, he prized aloofness, preferring to court attention when in the mood rather than submit to it at another's whim.

Going even faster, as if fearing to be late, the grom leaped down the dusty thoroughfare with Tamerlane padding along after, his head low. Once the grom stopped dead, and the cat ran up, his back arched, purring raucously. A soft, tingling extrusion stroked his thick fur, and Tamerlane rubbed against the delicious, foggy mass. Then, with a shrill, indignant mew, he sprang high in the air, his tail a bottle-brush, as the grom mischievously stabbed one slender pseudopod into the cat's body. A passerby laughed at Tamerlane's antics, calling coaxingly, but the cat snubbed him with insulting ostentation. It was a typical grom jest, and although startled and discomfited, Tamerlane soon forgave the offender. After all, it wasn't like the nasty business that had just gone on inside a man's head in the earlier byplay under the ladder. Groms never did *that* to cats. He was purring again as the grom resumed its purposeful journey.

Finally they reached the grom's goal: an empty lot, weed-grown and littered with trash. There was a burly blue-clad man wearing a metal star that gleamed in the hammering sunlight. He was fastening steel things on the wrists of a white-faced, terrified young prisoner who stood there panting, his clothes in cobwebby disarray. All about were other men—and one woman in a bright green dress and belt of red leather—watching, their faces grim. A few of them gathered casually in a small group between the policeman and the pole with its call box. Working

over his captive's wrists, the officer gave those loungers sidelong, speculative glances.

Bounding exultantly, the grom raced from one person to another, pawing at their shoulders, calling into their ears, rubbing shapeless fingers over their eyes. Tamerlane could see the pictures it invoked. A big grom like this one made visions easily—they were strange, dark, incomprehensible images that stirred humans to blind fury. Almost they dredged anger up from the blood itself. Tamerlane could not always understand a grom's tableau. This one, for example, showed the plump, frightened youth in a gloomy cellar, an unpleasant place of dirt and cobwebs. He was stooping over a little girl whose face was horribly bruised. Her skimpy dress was in shreds. Only the man didn't look quite the same as now; instead his expression was intense, his loose mouth moist. Tamerlane wasn't sure it was the same person until the grom sharpened the scene's focus, flooding it with a hot, reddish light. And then, inexplicably, the man's face lost its human look altogether, becoming a drooling mask, with great canines and a beast's snout. At the same time, the girl was no longer a grubby child, but a small angel with a sweet, innocent smile and hair of shining gold. Tamerlane's ears shrank against his narrow skull as a feral growl broke from the thickening crowd.

Furious, the policeman swung his captive behind him. His great ruddy face dripped perspiration as he harangued the sullen gathering. Suddenly he blew a piercing blast upon a whistle. This act seemed to galvanize the grom. For some moments it raged about the officer in grotesque, silent expostulation; but although the policeman cursed his prisoner continuously in a low, bitter voice, he held his ground against the aroused townspeople. The grom left him, finally, dashing from one person to the next, raving, gesticulating, and beating out a mad rhythm with its mushy paws.

There! A seething tirade in the ear of a blocky, unshaven man, and the policeman was swept aside. He blew another urgent blast upon his whistle; then somebody slapped it from his fingers. Several men seized the cowering youth, and the woman removed her belt of scarlet leather. Gobbling sounds sprayed from her over-red mouth, and the grom danced approval. Her green dress, unconfined, billowed sack-like about her dumpy figure. A man took the belt, nodding sardonic agreement. Tamerlane padded closer.

The mob converged upon the prisoner, who dropped to his knees, whimpering. A taurine bellow came from the outraged officer as they whipped the red belt about the boy's flabby neck. His handcuffed wrists

were tied to one thigh with shoelaces eagerly provided by a skinny urchin who seated himself upon the kerb for that purpose. An elderly man, lips pursed in disapproval, grabbed the youngster's shoulder and turned him away, pointing down the street. The boy tore free, edging nearer to the noosed youth.

They hustled the victim to a sycamore that stood just inside a shabby picket fence. The policeman made a last desperate effort to reach the call box, but three husky men intervened, arguing half apologetically. He drew the heavy revolver from its holster, but the mob jeered, daring him to fire. And the grom, in a fantastic dido, elongated itself to a smoky wisp, slid through the gun's barrel, and emerged from the breech to reform, fuzzily triumphant. Tamerlane glowed with appreciation. Never had he seen a more puckishly delightful grom.

The crowd had their victim under the sycamore now, but the belt was too short. While they discussed it loudly, the woman of the house came out, shrilling threats. They paid no attention to her, and she went back in. Tamerlane sprang to the top of the gate. He could see the woman standing in her hallway, shouting into a telephone.

A man removed his belt and, to a mutter of approbation, held his faded army pants up with one hand. The two belts were joined, and they had just flung one end over a branch when a squad car rolled up to disgorge six men in blue. They charged into the snarling mob, clubs swinging. Tamerlane crouched, ready to drop over the gate, but still entranced by the grom, who stormed with redoubled energy among the wavering humans. Then a policeman's club bloodied the leader's scalp, and the crowd retreated, splitting into smaller units, which shouted taunts but slowly gave way. The trembling youth, surrounded by police, was unceremoniously bundled into the car, and with its departure, the groups broke up, leaving the grom disconsolate.

Utterly dispirited now, the red spots fading out on its greyish surface, it funeral-marched down the street. Tamerlane hesitated. It seemed doubtful that anything of real interest would result from his accompanying the disgruntled grom farther.

He thought wistfully of the stone sill, aware too of growing hunger. Before long Dinah, a neurotic black dog vaguely spaniel in appearance, would be fed by her indulgent mistress. Tamerlane, according to plan, would permit himself to be ignominiously pursued instead of annihilating the yapping creature. After sharply reprimanding her dog, the owner, by way of apology to Tamerlane, would present him with a huge pile of dainties. Once a week, at least, it was worth trying. Besides, the

tender pads of his paws were sore from the heated pavement. Tamerlane turned towards town.

But suddenly the grom was alert once more, moving with eager, springy strides. A renewed purpose manifested itself plainly in the accelerated motion. Tamerlane slunk along, forgetting his throbbing paws. So intent was the grom that it even left a tall, tempting ladder with only a single flurry of acrobatics upon the twelfth rung. Soon they reached a point by the railroad tracks just out of town. There a freight train hundreds of feet long was groaning up a difficult grade.

Tamerlane stopped, puzzled, the irritating tang of oil in his sensitive nostrils. The grom was leaping, whirling, gloating alongside an ancient wooden boxcar. The cat felt baffled. He knew a great deal about groms, but this was hardly routine behaviour. A fresh excitement bristled his tawny fur—the prospect of something really novel in grom strategy.

Why was it following this particular boxcar? Tamerlane's eye-slits rounded to silent question marks. He sniffed the air. Was there something familiar in addition to the pungent scent of magnolias? The only response to this mental query was the impersonal chuckle of a valve, the almost somniferous click of wheels over rail joints.

Then, as the long freight slowed to a crawl at the peak of the grade, a dishevelled, dusty figure dropped from the boxcar. Tamerlane's tail tip came alive. One of those—and a stranger in town! Recalling certain affairs of the past in which big groms were involved, he began dimly to understand.

The grom was circling about the weary looking person, so lean and ragged, yet rhythmically loose in his slouching gait. Tamerlane crept closer, every hair erect, as the grom caracoled in anticipation. The unkempt, exhausted human saw the cat. Full, purple-red lips parted, and white teeth flashed in the black face. It was an appealing, warm grin.

'H'yuh, Kitty!' he said in a deep, buzzing voice. 'Comin' t' town, Mistah Cat? Less go then, Man—I craves eats.'

Eagerly, Tamerlane fell in behind the other two.

He knew that the grom would not be frustrated again.

The Second Debut

THE MORNING AFTER WAS a rough day for the laboratory mice. Ordinarily Dr Marek, like any good scientist, sacrificed them without either cruelty or compassion, but this time, even if his actions were not overly sadistic, he took savage, irrational pleasure in each execution as if by robbing the little animals of their lives and complexes, he somehow mitigated last night's disappointment.

The biochemist had only two great loves—obsessions, actually—in life: his own specialty, and the piano. Finding himself without any ability at the keyboard, in spite of lessons from the best teachers, he had tried again, vicariously, on his younger brother Walter.

As the boy's guardian, their parents having been killed during the Hungarian rebellion, Dr Marek had a free hand. So, from the age of six, Walter had been given the most rigorous and expensive musical education available. He had shown some talent as a pianist but no trace of real genius, even though there were many gifted Mareks among their ancestors. Unfortunately, the biochemist had succumbed to wishful thinking, and saw more in the boy than was there.

Walter's concert debut the night before had been a debacle. Technique, he had, but no insight; his Mozart was romanticized into bad Chopin; his Beethoven was thunderously empty; and he took all the storm and guts out of Bartok. The critics were merciless; how could anybody become so hopeless in a mere twenty years?

Heartbroken, Dr Marek plunged more deeply into his work. He snubbed Walter, avoiding him like some unclean thing; and felt even worse on noting that the boy didn't realize what a flop he was. The idiot thought the critics were wrong!

Nor was it a matter of time and maturity; other pianists developed real musicianship early, or they never attained it. No, Walter simply lacked the prime requirement of his art. There was nothing to be done.

Then, not for the first time, Dr Marek thought of Zygmunt

Jankowski, the keyboard genius with the incredible fingers of a Horowitz, the musicianship of a Rubinstein, the personality of a Paderewski. Jankowski was great at eighteen, incomparable at forty—and finished at fifty-two, his prime, fingers smashed in a car accident. After that, he had disappeared. And to think that he, Dr Marek, had dreamed of making Walter into another Jankowski!

But some dreams die hard, and Dr Marek was only thirty. He turned his attention to the problem of mice and music, only half aware of what he sought.

He began by conditioning a group of mice to respond to a pure musical note. When they had learned this, after many trials, he killed one-third of the sample, extracted the RNA/DNA complexes from their brains, where they were concentrated, and injected them into untrained mice. These were then taught to recognize a simple sequence of notes, a primitive melody. Then their RNA/DNA extracts were given to a fresh group. In each case of a new collection, the conditioning required fewer trials. Finally, Dr Marek had an elite group of mice that not only could recognize a theme, but respond to it when key and tempo were changed markedly; and with their extracts, previously untrained mice learned the same difficult chore with amazing celerity.

Now, mice are not men, and no scientist will extrapolate wildly from one species to the other, but since all life on earth is related, to bar inference completely would be just as unscientific as declaring unequivocally that mice equal men. So Dr Marek did not stop with mice, but went on to cats, dogs, and even a few budget-straining chimps.

Two years later he sent for Walter, who had been scratching out a frustrated living by teaching music at a good but not highly endowed college. The two brothers had seen little of each other since the concert, and Walter was understandably bitter. His own attempts to establish himself as a concert artist had failed; there were too many talented pianists with superior ability; and his technique, while adequate, could not compensate for his lack of understanding.

'You will live with me again,' Dr Marek told him crisply. He did not expect the order to be questioned, and it was not. When one has been dominated since the age of six by a strong-willed brother ten years older, revolt becomes impossible. Besides, was not Stefan a great scientist, well-paid and creative, a man too dedicated even to marry?

'Why do you want me?' the boy asked gloomily. 'I have failed you as a pianist.'

'That may be changed,' was the cryptic reply. 'Your trouble could

have been due to a chemical imbalance. I mean to give you a course of injections. Then we shall see.'

'What kind of injections?'

'You might think of them as a variety of vitamins; it doesn't matter. If they work, both your technique and insight will be much enhanced. But,' he added sternly, 'you must practise, eight hours a day. I've had the Bechstein tuned. Work, plus the injections, and who knows—by next year Walter Marek may surprise the critics.'

The boy brightened. He knew little about biochemistry, but had unbounded faith in his brother.

'I shall work,' he said eagerly. 'It will be like old times again, Stefan.'

'Except that I shall not be your judge,' Dr Marek said. 'I was not objective. This time Madame Berrier shall listen to you.'

She was a friend of Stefan's—a sometime mistress, in fact—and one of the greatest woman pianists of her generation. Walter knew she would set a high standard, and flinched a little. Those enormous, flaring dark eyes were hard to face when angry, brooked no mistakes.

The injections began at once, and were unpleasant. Dr Marek was not a physician, and had no delicacy of touch with a hypodermic. He was used to laboratory animals, that squeaked or grunted, but couldn't berate him as ham-handed. Finally, however, after Walter's vehement objections, he acquired a finer needle, and improved his technique.

Both men were soon indifferent to such minor matters, because with startling speed Walter began to make progress. His fingers improved daily, so that the arpeggios rippled out in a smooth, dazzling stream, the ponderous chords sounded with precise synchronization and clangour, the trills vibrated like a snake's rattles. Bach was sounding as he should, and not like a composition by Tchaikovsky out of Chaminade.

Nor was there any self-deception involved. Those wonderful eyes of Madame Berrier had first narrowed incredulously, and then shone opalescent as Walter played Schubert's 'Wanderer Fantasy'. Not since Edwin Fischer's performance had she heard anything to match it.

'Formidable!' she exclaimed, and kissed him.

A few weeks later, at the age of twenty-three, Walter Marek made his second debut as a concert pianist. The critics—the four who bothered—came to rend, since flaying a presumptuous incompetent is one of the major rewards of the profession; they stayed, after many encores thunderously applauded, as willing captives. Walter was a handsome boy, but now he glowed with fresh beauty, and his personality had acquired a flamboyant, careless charm that was irresistible. His performance was

superb from the opening 'Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue' to the last number, the difficult and exciting Chopin 'Étude in A Minor', sometimes called 'The Winter Wind'.

From then on, his progress was phenomenal. He played with all the major orchestras, made innumerable brilliant recordings, and sold out at every concert.

One morning, his face troubled, Walter came to Stefan, and said, 'I wonder if I'm going mad. Something very strange happened to me just now.'

Dr Marek gave him a sharp stare, his eyes narrowing. 'What is it?' he demanded.

'You know I've never studied the "Hammerklavier". Well, I was sight-reading the five movement today and, all at once, there I was, playing along without looking at the music.' He laughed uneasily. 'It wasn't much of a performance—after all, the "Hammerklavier" is a lifework—but that I should know the notes . . . it disturbs and frightens me.'

His brother became deathly white, looked years older, but his voice was steady as he said, 'Come, Walter, it's not that unusual. You have heard others play it and you've listened to the old Schnabel records as a boy. You're a very talented fellow. Wasn't it Mendelssohn who came back from an oratorio that was kept secret, and transcribed it all from memory, just from hearing it? You are the same kind of genius.'

'Thanks to your vitamins,' Walter said in a low voice, giving Stefan a wondering stare.

'No,' his brother said roughly. 'You had the last of those six months ago. All they did was bring out the true Marek gift that is in your blood—and even mine, perhaps.'

'I often wondered why you never took such injections,' Walter said. 'Your desire to play well was always greater than mine; we both know that.'

'I didn't want them; I have my work,' Stefan said quickly. 'I developed them especially for you, but now their part is done. You are the finest pianist in the world; everybody admits that. Your prowess has earned unlimited acclaim.'

During the years that followed, Walter consolidated his position as the best of the century. His specialty was Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, a late and very difficult work of the composer. Walter played it much faster, and with more use of the pedal than other pianists, yet somehow kept the musical line under iron control so that the final

impression was one of enormous excitement without the taint of eccentric phrasing.

Meanwhile Dr Marek became more withdrawn and grim, spending long hours in the laboratory, and gradually giving up all teaching chores. Walter was too happy and creative now to fret about Stefan, but wondered occasionally, in a vague way, if his brother were ill. Certainly the man looked hag-ridden and tormented, aged beyond his years.

Still, after all these omens, Walter was shocked when Stefan died suddenly at forty-nine; and yet there was a guilty feeling of release, as if a shadow had moved away from him to reveal the sunlight in full strength.

Dr Marek's colleagues, who honoured the work, if not the man, wanted to publish his collected researches, and Walter, unwilling to have outsiders meddle with Stefan's papers, decided to do the basic screening himself. The notebooks were neatly shelved in chronological order, but two were oddly missing—the ones for the years of Walter's rebirth as a pianist. A careful search proved fruitless; either they were lost or had been destroyed.

There were, of course, some boxes of more personal papers, which cost Walter some pangs of memory: Stefan at eighteen, dark, handsome, self-reliant, and slightly grim, as circumstances in Hungary warranted; his parents, lost at six, he could not remember well, but his mother's face, full of vivacity and charm, made one old photo sparkle with life.

Then, in an envelope of clippings, Walter found some items that puzzled him greatly, since Stefan had no interest in crime. The one on top, dated sixteen years previously, was headed: 'Gruesome Find on Skid Row'. It came from the biggest town in the country, not far from their home. Walter scanned it wonderingly, then his attention sharpened. 'The headless body of a derelict has turned out to be that of Zygmunt Jankowski, once called the greatest pianist in the world. After an accident in which his fingers were hopelessly mangled, he vanished, and was lost until now. Whether he was killed for a few coins, or was the victim of thrill-seeking perverts who have preyed on skid row bums for some years now, is not known.'

Walter read on. This was no ordinary man, but Jankowski, so tragically dead. '. . . married the beautiful French singer, Claudine Michaud, who committed suicide when he disappeared'. Suddenly Walter felt a terrible pang at his heart. He saw a woman's face, hauntingly beautiful in its modelling, planes, and colour; and a low, sweet voice, full of love and anguish called his name . . . *his* hame? No; she sang 'Zygmunt, Zygmunt . . .' and the harsh Polish syllables were

pure melody in his ears. He shook his head as if to clear it; this was surely a mental aberration.

Unwilling to probe further, Walter skimmed the other clippings. The murder was not solved; there was more biographical material on Jankowski, though. One sentence caught his eye. It read: 'Jankowski was celebrated for his dazzling, unorthodox interpretation of the massive "Hammerklavier" Sonata of Beethoven. He played it extremely fast, sure of his flawless technique, but always with perfect control, so that there was no suggestion of mere caprice. . . .' *How very odd,* Walter thought; *it might be a description of my own approach. . . .*

The Moths

BEFORE HE BECAME AN alcoholic recluse—and that was many years ago; more than he could remember now, even in his brief intervals of sobriety—Gene Temple had been a promising biologist. Even in his present state, there were times when he paused in his rambling walks, with a kind of shock of recognition, to discover that some flitting insect, darting lizard, or soaring hawk brought Latin names to his lips—names he knew were accurate, but forgotten for years.

In the beginning, it had been a brief episode of unprofessional carelessness that had ruined his career. He had allowed a species of beetle, highly destructive of several vital food plants, and permitted into this country only under the most rigid conditions of experiments in isolation, to escape from the laboratory. Only desperate measures by other entomologists, heavily supported with government money, had kept the insect from doing irreparable harm to a whole state; and even now, almost forty years later, the beetle still required constant control by special pesticides.

Only a few of his intimates knew what lay behind his hours of carelessness: the death of a beloved young wife, taken by a painful disease, and the wild distraction that followed. Almost insane with grief, Temple had not even known, until months later, that he had left the wire cage open, and permitted a dozen gravid beetles to escape on their strong wings. Nor had he offered any excuses; just his resignation. After that, although there were few enough jobs open to him, he refused the ones available, and disappeared.

At first, he felt only guilt and misery, but over the years a new emotion drowned out the others: it was resentment. Resentment of his colleagues for not defending him more vigorously; resentment of the press, for treating him like a criminal; and finally, a general, vague resentment of the whole world, which, he became convinced, had abused him just as it had abused so many other talented people.

That all these charges were exaggerated, not to say quite unfounded, was a fact lost to his befuddled brain, poisoned by too much alcohol.

Lying on the filthy cot in a shack long since abandoned by its original owner, Temple tended to daydream about the past, seeing himself as a brilliant young scientist unfairly crushed by fate—this in the loss of Julie, his wife—and then callously mistreated by the public. He had visions of the discoveries he might have made, which the world must now do without. A cure for cancer, based on his notion—how long ago was that?—about gall insects and their plant-tumours; people would miss that, all right! Or those nettles, with fiercely viable thick roots; if one could graft fruits and more valuable plants to such hardy growths, nothing in the way of insects or fungi could injure the crops; you couldn't kill one of those blasted nettles with a flame-thrower! Sure, it was not easy; apples and weeds don't graft worth a damn; but with new radioactive techniques—to destroy the rejection reactions—an ingenious young man could do wonders. Young man, Temple thought wryly; I'm pushing seventy—or is it sixty; well, it feels like ninety.

He turned on the soiled coverlet, groaning, and touched his abdomen gingerly. Through the shrunken tissue he could feel a great mass, thick and spongy. That was only just the granddaddy, he knew; its children and granchildren were widespread throughout his body. A matter of months; maybe weeks. Well, the sooner the better. That freeway was coming closer, and this miserable patch of weeds—fifty acres of worthless gulley—would soon be gobbled up, leaving him as homeless as some rodent scooped out of its nest by a plough. And there was no place else to go. Here the $20 a month from Julie's little estate kept him alive, after a fashion, and even supplied with popskull, provided he ate stale bread, beans, and didn't disdain handouts in town. Yes, better to end it here than in some charity ward, lying in his own filth, with bored, harrassed, underpaid state attendants waiting for him to die.

It was getting dark. Ordinarily he didn't mind that, because dreaming was easier in the absence of light. Julie's elfin face became clearer as the dusk flowed into the shack; and he could see again the shining lab equipment, and the lovely phase microscope.

But this evening, the night was unwelcome; it hinted at the other Night, soon to be upon him—a Night he believed eternal. That didn't matter, either. If he were simple-minded enough to think Julie waited beyond, he would be too stupid to qualify as a scientist; better intellectual honesty than the comfort of idiotic myths. Shakespeare said it all, the whole story; there was more convincing theology in *Macbeth* than in

St Thomas, Calvin, Barth, Luther—the whole silly crowd. A Tale told by an Idiot, full of Sound and Fury, signifying Nothing. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. All you had to do was take a good look at the world. Children dying in agony everywhere; evil flourishing; the good at bay, helpless. If I were designing the Universe, Temple told himself, not for the first time, I'd make health catching instead of disease. Perfect Design—hogwash. Did a poor grub have to be eaten alive by gnat-larvae to make God's work perfect? What nonsense!

But this wasn't helping the growing darkness. There was half a candle left somewhere. He sat up, grunting, and hunted for it. He found the stump wax-welded to the bottom of a tuna can, lit it, and stood it on a packing case. It reminded him of Mark Twain's joke. Need to light another candle to see this one, he told himself. Sighing, he stumbled back to the cot. From under the bedclothes he dragged a wine-bottle; it had only a few drops left. He sucked at the mouth, muttered a curse, and tossed the empty to a corner of the hut. Then he lay on one side, conscious of the lump in his middle, watching the candle.

Then the moth came, right through the glassless, unscreened window. He followed its flight incuriously—at first—then with growing interest. Surely that was a *Melittia gloriosa cookei*! He blinked incredulously. This extremely rare sub-species of the beautiful man root borer moth had been known only in this county; but that was almost fifty years back; it was believed extinct in 1918, for that matter. He himself hadn't seen one before except in a collection. He was too interested in the find to be surprised at the tenacity of his memory.

The big moth, with its black and yellow abdomen, brownish forewings, and orange hind wings, was a striking sight as it fluttered near the candleflame.

Temple squinted blearily, half minded to save the rare insect. Then he saw something else, something he couldn't quite believe. The candle flame sputtered; that should have meant a crippled moth, with scorched wings, but there was no sign of injury as the big insect resumed its flight. Obviously, Temple told himself, it hadn't really stayed in the flame. Then he gulped; the moth hovered directly over the yellow tip, seeming to run its abdomen through the fire. The candle dimmed again, and now the insect paused in the very heart of the flame. Then it flew out, strong and unhurt.

Temple struggled to his feet. The moth alighted on the packing case, and shooting out one hand with astonishing deftness, the man captured it.

Even from the feel of its wings, he knew wonder. Holding it nearer

the flame, Temple studied the pulsating insect. Not a *cookei* after all—there were differences, slight but unmistakeable to an expert. This was a mutant; why, the wings were like metal foil, almost; no wonder the flame didn't hurt them. A female, too, and loaded with eggs, by God!

He turned a grimy tumbler over the moth, and hastily improvised from a cardboard box and a scrap of hardware cloth; it was a poor excuse for a cage, but it would do. Temple forgot that he was old and sick, and gloated over the moth until the candle died out. If there was another, he couldn't find it, and returned to the cot, his brain frenetically active.

A mutant; more than that, a wildly improbable and unheard of one. Considering how rare the basic species was, it might even be true—it almost certainly was true—that this moth was unique; no other in the whole world. But with eggs. He must see if she bred true. Would the new generation be able to hover in candle flames, and why should they, anyhow? What was the survival value, if any?

Lying there in the summer dark, he stiffened suddenly. Energy! What else; it had to be that. The moth drew energy directly from the flame. No, it was too wild; too silly; too unscientific. And yet . . . And yet, he told himself sternly, prove it; then talk.

It was hours before he slept, and not restfully; he had strange dreams.

The next day the moth laid her eggs—and died. Temple watched over them as broodingly as any hen. When they hatched, he offered them sumach roots, which was one of the staples of the parent species. The larvae were quite uninterested; nothing tempted them, and yet they grew. Squirming restlessly in the sun, their bodies expanded, and finally they spun cocoons. From these they emerged after a remarkably short period of metamorphosis. Temple saw with delight that most of them bred true, having the same stigmata as their mother, even to the black crescent on the hindwings.

They clung weakly to the plant-stems he had provided for their silk-work. Clung until the sun reached them, then they bowed towards it with wings held forward like cloaks. And still they refused all food; sugar, honey, syrup—the things moths love did not tempt these at all. Daily they bowed to the sun, and would have flown miles, if free. Moths seeking the sun; it was something to excite an entomologist, even if he were a dying man.

Temple had a last dream. These moths, the only ones in the world, were energy converters, drawing their life from fire—sunfire, candle-fire, no doubt others. In their tiny bodies was the answer to the earth's energy needs. Fusion had turned out a bust. Fossil fuels were about

gone; the world was overpopulated and hungry. He, Temple, could save the world; that's what it amounted to. All he had to do was produce these moths. The scientists might be sceptical, but they couldn't pass up any angles—not these days. In modern labs, forty years ahead of his, they could wrest from the insects the most precious secret of the century—of all the ages, in fact: direct conversion of energy from the sun. Sure, he could save the world, but why should he?

The moths fluttered restlessly under the screening. They were anxious to be free, to use their bubbling energy, to propagate their kind. Nature would never hit on their like again. Whatever fantastic combination of genes, of DNA, had brought them into being, and from so rare a sub-species, was not going to happen again soon. It would take millions of years, at best, and the earth couldn't spare them; not man's earth.

Temple felt old and ill; the mass in his stomach pulled him towards the ground. What were moths to him, or science, or the people of the world? Let them starve in their stupid, crowded billions!

He put the cage on the splintered boards of the floor, and crunched down heavily with his right foot. There was a flash of bright flame; he felt its heat even through the thick sole. Then a sound as of a large fuse blowing. He lifted the shoe. Greenish pulp. No more beauty; no more eager power—just green ooze.

He lurched to the bed, dropped face down, and fumbled blindly in the tangle of bedclothes. He found a bottle actually a third full, and blinked at it in delighted wonder. . . .

At dusk, after much grumbling and searching, he found an inch of thick, green candle. He stuck it to the edge of the packing case, and flopped back on the cot, to watch it. But he knew no more moths would come.

A little later, he died. The candle guttered out, but a tiny flame arose on the corner of the wooden case.

When the shack was one great arrowhead of flames, two moths arrived from different directions out of the summer night. Each had a pair of black crescents. They hovered ecstatically in the withering updraught, glowing like jewels. Then they mated.

The Man Who Wouldn't Eat

BRYCE DONALDSON HAD MANAGED to have his way for fifty-odd years, and didn't intend to be stopped now by a sallow shrimp of a mulatto. Slowly, with calculated showmanship, he put another crisp hundred-dollar bill on the large pile.

'That makes two thousand,' he said. 'One hell of a lot of money. How about it, Ledoux?'

The mulatto shook his head, obviously regretful, but adamant, like one forced to refuse an unreasonable request made by a dear friend. But Donaldson was a comparative stranger, recently arrived from New York.

'I have explained,' Ledoux said in his careful English, 'that the letter has been in my family for generations. Even if I wished to sell it—and I do not—it isn't mine to dispose of. It is a sort of heirloom, or legacy, if you like, which I hold in trust for my son, as he will do for his son.'

'You're being very foolish,' Donaldson said patiently. He was too experienced a bargainer to become offensively aggressive. His wealth and persistence had enabled him to track down and acquire perhaps the best Napoleon collection in the world. 'With two thousand American dollars, you could live like a king here in Haiti. Right now you have nothing; even your home is a shack—no place for a man of education. For that matter, you could use the money to educate your boy.'

'What you say is true,' the mulatto admitted without resentment. 'But I am used to being poor; almost everybody here is poor. As for my son, the letter is all I can leave him.'

'But you needn't stay so poor. Just say the word, and the money's yours. Believe me, it's a fair price.'

Ledoux's amber eyes dropped wistfully to the pile of notes, then shifted away as if guilty of too much covetousness.

'I am sorry, M'sieu.'

There was something in his soft, almost lisping voice, that Donaldson recognised. This particular approach was finished. No amount of money

would help. It was time to try something else. To put on the pressure; to arouse fear, greed, shame—anything that would shatter the mulatto's resistance. Often in the past, he had succeeded by just such a shift in tactics. All that he needed now was to find Ledoux's particular weakness. Everybody had one. Perhaps he could get the man drunk; or buy him a desirable wench—morals were slack here in Haiti—or produce some glittering toy that appealed more than money. After all, in spite of his infusion of French blood, the mulatto was a savage at the core like any half-breed.

One thing was certain: Donaldson meant to have that letter in the end. The priceless thing must not escape his grasp. Right now, no other collector in the world knew of a personal message from Napoleon to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the lion-hearted Negro who freed Haiti from the French. Perhaps it was this very note in Napoleon's handwriting that lured Toussaint to Paris, so that the Emperor could forswear himself, and trap the patriot.

'Very well, Ledoux,' he said coldly. 'I must accept the situation. It's a pity you won't be reasonable. Why not think about it for a few days.' What he didn't say aloud was that the acceptance needn't be for long. Just until he could find a chink in the mulatto's armour. 'I'll be back for another talk, soon.' He left the little hut. It was clean enough, but a wretched place for all that. Ledoux was a fool. What good was one lousy letter to him? With Donaldson, the thing could be a keystone of his superb collection. Just because the mulatto had a few drops of old Toussaint's blood in him was no reason to keep the letter forever.

As he climbed into his sleek Porsche, Donaldson was already making plans. If the document was hidden in Ledoux's hut, it could be stolen. More likely, though, it was safely buried somewhere in these rugged Haitian hills. A cautious lot, these natives. Well, there were other ways.

For several weeks Donaldson applied himself and his money to acquiring data about Ledoux. The mulatto was well-known in Port au Prince, and liked by all. He made a living, of sorts, by teaching French and English. As for weaknesses, he seemed to have none that mattered. He drank sparingly, had the same mistress for over ten years, and valued books above trinkets. Unfortunately, he didn't love them so much that he could be bribed with a first edition or a fancy binding. Not even by a flawless *Candide*, once the property of Frederick the Great.

That left only one chink—a tiny crevice, indeed. It was said that Ledoux liked to bet. Every time the lottery was held, he bought a ticket. Never more than one, but always that one. To discount this angle,

however, it was also known that Ledoux rarely risked any substantial sum, even by his own economic standards, and preferred sure things.

But even as a minute opening may be enough for a parasitic insect, so this small failing gave Donaldson his chance. All that he had to do was rig some bet tempting enough to make the mulatto stake the letter. That two thousand, of course, for which the poor devil obviously hungered, could be put in the balance as bait. If Ledoux felt that he could win the money without much chance of losing the heirloom, then the man would surely take a chance. So Donaldson estimated the situation, with a facility based on years of shrewd dealing. The only problem now was to devise a suitable bet.

There was no difficulty about studying Ledoux. As long as Donaldson didn't press him too much over the letter, the little mulatto was perfectly willing to talk about the life and times of Napoleon, or the customs of his strange, fascinating homeland. On the first topic, the New Yorker was thoroughly qualified, and able to hold more critical hearers than Ledoux. But it was the second that gave him his chance for a bet.

It began, naturally enough for Haiti, with the topic of voodoo.

'The officials insist it's been stamped out,' Ledoux said. 'But they know it hasn't. Back in the hills, voodoo is just as much alive as in 1800. In fact, even among the supposedly more enlightened people, it has a surprising grip.'

'I don't suppose you believe in that stuff,' Donaldson said.

'That depends on what you mean by "believe"!'

'I mean supernatural powers—what else?'

'The supernatural may be the natural, after all. But in some form as yet unrecognised. In 1500, a telegraph would have been supernatural.'

'I know that argument,' Donaldson said. 'But I'm talking about zombies, and murder by magic—the concrete applications of voodoo.'

'As to zombies, there is conflicting testimony. I myself have never seen one. Some people say a few idiots working in the fields have given rise to the notion. But when it comes to murder, the facts are known to all. Right now, just a few hundred yards from here, a husky young Negro is dying because a voodoo priest, Papa Joseph, has cursed him.'

Donald smiled faintly, almost a sneer.

'Dying of what?'

'Just dying—wasting away. Papa Joseph merely told him: "You are going to shrink to skin and bones; and will be dead in two weeks." The man took to his bed—that was three days ago—and hasn't taken any food or water since.'

'In other words, the fool is dying of fear.'

'That's quite possible. But nobody can remove that fear; therefore the man will die.'

'Maybe if he ate and drank, he would live.'

'Maybe. But he won't try.'

Donaldson was silent, his mind active. Obviously Ledoux had strong feelings about this type of thing. He seemed certain the man could not be saved. Very likely he was right, too. Still, if there was a way, and he, Donaldson, could find it . . . Was this the angle he'd been looking for? No harm in preparing the ground a bit; he needn't commit himself yet.

'I don't believe that man would die if he were nourished. A healthy body instinctively fights to live.'

'Perhaps,' the mulatto said a little impatiently. 'But the point is, they never do eat or drink. Years ago a doctor tried force feeding. Intravenously, among other methods. Food taken by mouth was thrown up. Glucose injected——' He shrugged. 'Maybe excreted unused—who knows? Anyway, it didn't work. The fellow just faded away, and died. I assure you, this one will do the same. Unless, of course, Papa Joseph should remove the curse.'

'Why don't the man's family buy him off?'

'He has no family. But it's not a matter of money. The man did something very bad to Marcel Crain, so Marcel bought his life from the priest. Voodoo has its own ethics. Papa Joesph cannot sell that life back at any price. Neither would killing the priest change anything.'

'As I understand it,' Donaldson said slowly, 'the Negro will die because he's convinced he must—right?'

Ledoux shrugged.

'It may be as you say, M'sieu. But if so, the fear is very deep—and quite irremovable. Nothing that I know of can save Louis Moreau.'

'The question intrigues me. I'll try to think of a way.'

'As you like,' the mulatto replied, his voice full of ironic doubt. 'Me, I know the man is already dead. There is nothing anybody can do. It is well known that in primitive tribes any individual can will himself to die. This is similar, except that our man has been ordered to will himself, so to speak.' He ushered his guest to the door.

'I'll come up with something to fool that priest,' Donaldson said, adding to himself: and it may just cost you Napoleon's letter, my superstitious friend.

For several days, motivated by his own peculiar daemon—the greed of a collector—Donaldson made a careful study of voodoo faith killings. Most of the ideas he thought of had been tried by other people in the past. None had worked. Back in 1927, one hopeful doctor had even used hypnotism. But the seed of fear and self-destruction planted by the priest was too firmly rooted to be torn out, even in the deepest trance that could be produced. When ordered to eat and drink, the hypnotised native had made the attempt meekly enough, only to vomit up every bit a moment later. No, Donaldson would have to find another solution.

It took him five days of the eleven left to Louis Moreau, but he conceived a feasible plan, finally. There was a good chance of it working, and for the letter, Donaldson would gladly stake his money on any reasonable hope of success. Now to trap Ledoux before the two weeks were gone. He returned to the little hut to present his snare.

'So you think Moreau can be saved,' the mulatto said, pouring a glass of rum for his guest. 'How?'

'That's my little secret just now,' Donaldson told him, smiling. 'They say you're a betting man; so I have a proposition. If the voodoo priest is right, Moreau will be dead in about five more days. If I can show him to you in, say, two weeks, eating heartily, and with most of his strength back, will you admit I've done the impossible?'

Ledous stared at him.

'It can't be done,' he muttered. 'The man will never eat.'

'Then you would bet on the priest against me.'

'I have no money for betting.'

'There is the letter.'

The mulatto stiffened.

'That subject has been closed, M'sieu.'

'But you can't lose—so you've been saying. If Moreau won't eat, he dies. You believe nobody can make him eat. Well, I'll put up the same two thousand against the letter—see, here it is.' Once again he spread the bills on the table. Ledoux's mournful amber eyes glistened; his forehead became damp.

'Who is to decide?'

Donaldson knew his man.

'You, yourself. Not that there's any problem. It's not hard to tell a living, vigorous man from a corpse. If you are satisfied that Moreau is recovering his health and strength two weeks after he's supposed to be dead, then I get the Napoleon letter. If not, you keep the money. Well, Ledoux?'

The mulatto was silent. It was a fortune there before him. So many problems would be solved. His son was not well; pupils were getting scarce; nobody had money these days. Besides, Moreau couldn't be saved. Ledoux had seen dozens of such cases. It was impossible to remove the man's conviction of imminent death. Like the old joke of offering somebody a million dollars if he could avoid thinking of the word 'Aardvark' for one minute. Nobody could do that. There was really no risk to the letter. None at all.

His slight body tensed.

'Very well, M'sieu. Since you are so determined, I agree.'

'Good,' Donaldson said. 'See you in about two weeks.'

Exactly sixteen days later, Donaldson returned to Ledoux's house in his Porsche.

'Come on,' he said jovially. 'Time to settle our bet.'

'What's been happening?' the mulatto demanded, as they careered down a narrow dirt road. 'I hear you took Moreau in an ambulance right after our talk, and nobody knows what's become of him.'

'I had to isolate him in order to do anything; that's simple. Too many damn meddlers in town. Besides, it wasn't possible to experiment in that shack of his. Anyhow, in a few minutes you'll see Moreau for yourself.'

Ledoux jerked upright in the seat, a dazed look on his sallow face.

'You mean he's still alive? Moreau didn't die? It's not possible; I know these cases. When the priest tells a man he'll waste away, the man cannot eat. He doesn't want food, and if he should somehow get hungry, it won't stay down.'

A brief, sardonic grin, more of a sneer, touched Donaldson's thin lips. Suddenly he rammed on the brakes, and the car skidded to a stop. He opened the door, slid out, and walked back a few feet. Ledoux peered after him, puzzled. Donaldson came back, holding something gingerly by one leg. It was one of the island toads, a blue-black, soggy-looking thing, smeared with blood and dirt.

'Car nipped it,' Donaldson explained briefly. He found a manilla envelope in the glove compartment, put the little corpse inside, and slipped them into the side pocket of his jacket. Once more he raced the car down a series of back roads.

After ten minutes of bone-shaking progress, he stopped on what seemed little more than a trail. To one side, almost hidden among the trees, was a large, ramshackle house.

'I rented this joint,' Donaldson said. 'For a hideout. Let's go, Ledoux.'

He led the bewildered mulatto into the old place, and down a long, musty corridor.

'Moreau's in the back bedroom; this way.'

They came to a heavy door which Donaldson unlocked. He flung it open, and Ledoux saw a man lying on the bed. It was Moreau, a healthy, plump Moreau, his black skin oily-bright with vitality. He was soiled and unkempt; the linen, too, was filthy; and the room smelled like a neglected menagerie. Moreau smiled vaguely at the two men, and when Donaldson took a greasy bun from his pocket, seized it avidly.

'Moreau!' Ledoux exclaimed. 'How are you, boy? It's a miracle! But what a mess you have here.'

Moreau gobbled at them as he wolfed the pastry. His eyes were those of a stunned beast. The mulatto turned on Donaldson in horror.

'He's changed completely. Louis was always so neat. What did you do to him?'

'I had to make him ignore the curse,' Donaldson said complacently. 'First I flew in a doctor to try shock treatment—you know, electricity applied to the brain. Oddly enough, that didn't work; the man still wouldn't eat or drink. It was a tough proposition, and for a while I thought you had me licked. Then I remembered frontal lobotomy; that's where they cut some nerves in the head. The doctor didn't like the idea, but I convinced him. After all, the man was dying. A generous fee didn't hurt my case, either,' he added cynically.

'You had no right——'

'Of course not; but I bought one from the officials. Like you, they take the curse very seriously, and had Moreau written off. Since he has no close relatives, and the good American wants to supply medical treatment—well, you see it worked. Right now he doesn't know Papa Joseph from Mother Machree. He's alive, though, you'll have to admit. So you owe me one letter, Ledoux.'

'It was a trick,' the mulatto protested. 'You've taken his mind—his soul! Louis would be better off dead.'

'Nonsense. He's alive and healthy—eating like a bear after a hard winter's hibernation. That's better than wasting away. It's up to you whether or not I've won the bet.'

Moreau gibbered some meaningless phrases. He was drooling. Ledoux shuddered, averting his eyes.

'All right,' he said bitterly. 'I can't go back on my word. You'll get the letter.' There were tears in his amber eyes. 'I should have given it to you

in the beginning, so that Moreau could die in peace.' He was sobbing now. 'And me, too; now I've lost the one thing of value in the family: the letter meant for my only son. You have done a very bad thing, M'sieu; and so have I. We both have much to answer for.'

'You can soothe your conscience by looking after Moreau,' Donaldson said. 'It's been messy looking after him these last few days. As soon as I get that letter, I'm off to New York.' He looked at the human vegetable standing there. 'Instead of dying, I bet he'll make ninety. Well, he's all yours, Ledoux; now lead me to the letter. No, by God—I almost forgot. I want you to see this, so you can tell that damned voodoo priest.'

He took the manilla envelope from his pocket, and removed the toad. One of its legs twitched feebly. Donaldson held the thing out to Moreau; at the same time he pointed to his mouth, then rubbed his abdomen enthusiastically. The big Negro grinned hungrily, displaying his perfect teeth. Ledoux gulped once, then turned blindly, rushing from the room.

'Hey, Ledoux, come back—you're missing it. I want you to tell Papa Joseph I'm a better voodoo artist than he ever was. The old boy was so certain Moreau couldn't eat any more. Well you tell him that thanks to Bryce Donaldson, Moreau will eat anything. I mean any old thing at all.'

The Fanatic

THEY WERE LYING ON the knoll, a most incongruous couple in appearance—he so short, shaggy; untidy, and dark, with the hot intolerant eyes of a fanatic; and she, immaculate in her light summer frock, the ultimate in a cool, Nordic blonde.

The sun dipped below the horizon, allowing purple dusk to smoke up from the earth.

'Now you'll see,' he muttered.

'If I didn't know better, I'd think you were serious.'

'I am—damned serious. Serious enough to take steps, and soon.' He gave her a puzzled scrutiny. 'I thought you understood; that you weren't like those clods in the bar.'

'But I was sure you were just seeing how much they'd swallow. I never dreamed—Jerry, you can't *mean* you really believe the things you said.'

His pale eyes flared more hotly under their heavy brows.

'I might've known,' he rasped. 'What made me think a girl you pick up in a bar might have a few brains. Look, Eunice——'

'Men in bars can have brains, no matter how much they guzzle,' she interrupted him. 'But women are different, huh? It's not my brains that are in question, but yours, if you truly believe——'

'Skip it,' he said. 'Here they come now. Watch and learn something—if that one is still in there.

The bats were pouring out of the cave, millions of them it seemed, although an experienced observer would place the total under ten thousand. Still, as they came like dark smoke from the narrow opening, the sheer bulk of their flow was overwhelming in its effect on the eye, recalling the vast flights of passenger pigeons a hundred years earlier.

Jerry had his binoculars raised, and was studying the fringes of the horde. Suddenly he grasped the girl's arm, abstractedly aware of the firmness of her flesh; she's certainly quite a physical specimen, some

inner part of his brain told him. Healthy as a horse—maybe a little dumber, which was disappointing, since he'd hoped there would be an ally at last . . .

'Look!' he cried. 'On the right of the main crowd—that bunch of eight—no, nine. What do you see?'

He passed her the binoculars, but she waved them aside.

'I can see,' she said calmly, her large blue eyes narrowing for a moment.

'Well?' he demanded impatiently. 'Yes or no?'

'They're just bats, I suppose.'

'Hell!' he snapped. 'Why do I waste my time. I *told* you what to look for. Now they're out of range.' He eyed her in a kind of disgust. 'You mean to tell me you couldn't see the difference?'

'For heaven's sake, Jerry, I'm no expert! What do I know about bats? They were all flying up and down——'

'Like hell they were. One was soaring—like a hawk. This is the third time I've spotted it. Just a hair bigger; maybe a bit off-colour; that doesn't matter. But bats don't soar—ever. Maybe that's because at night there aren't the updraughts day birds use; or maybe because they catch flying insects on the wing. But bats don't soar.' He took out a fat, maroon-covered notebook, and checked something off. Then he closed it with an air of finality. 'That's it. I have enough data. It's time to *do* something.'

'What *is* this data—not those little things——'

'"These data"—the word is plural,' he said irritably, only half listening. Then, angrily: 'Little things! You weren't listening last night. Animals are very rigid in certain aspects of their behaviour. When you see a dog that never circles before lying down; a pigeon that forgets to bob its head; a bat that soars, instead of flitting——'

'You're too wrapped up in this wild idea,' she said. Then she put one hand on his arm in a rubbing, caressing motion, and added: 'Don't you ever want to have any fun? Just enjoy yourself?'

He moodily pushed her fingers free, and said almost to himself: 'Women are just like cats. When a guy has the time and the strongest urge, they have to wash their hair or visit their mother. But the minute he's up to his neck in something really important, then they begin to feel amorous. Once I clear up this business, Baby, you'll see——'

'I don't know why I waste so much time on you,' she said plaintively. Then, in a coaxing voice: 'Jerry, did you ever think of seeing a doctor?'

He grinned sourly.

'Why don't you say it? Psychiatrist; head-shrinker.' He laughed in a harsh voice, without mirth. 'And I don't know why I bother to wake people up. Any culture, no matter how alien, would be an improvement on what we've got. Maybe I don't like being suckered. Even if nobody else is wise to Them——'

'Oh, brother!' she exclaimed. 'The old story. "Them."'

'I went at it wrong last time,' he said, ignoring the remark. 'I tried dissection, looking for different organs and things like that. But I'm not enough of a pathologist. And I couldn't get any help, damn it. I even tried sending rabbit's blood to a Public Health Office, asking for a tularemia check; I hoped they might spot something funny in the sample. But the clowns just reported negative on the tularemia. If there was something, they missed it, naturally; you have to be prepared, and not just doing a routine job, I suppose.'

'Isn't it possible,' she demanded, 'that lower animals have their morons and misfits, too?'

'Some, sure. But I've seen too many aberrations. And this time I've a better angle.'

'What is it?'

'If I tell you, you'll want to go running to the cops or something,' he said. There was a wistful tone in his voice. She sensed instantly that he still yearned for a confidant.

'I won't—I promise. Tell me.'

'Well, let's assume some of these animals are not animals at all, as I've been saying, but spies of a sort. Don't ask me from where, but very intelligent. This way they can go anywhere, and study us; wild and domestic—both. I know it's like something from the corniest old science-fiction magazines; but truth is always essentially corny. All right; they're dedicated and clever; some—maybe most—will die rather than talk. But no society is free of weaklings. With enough stress—the right threat—some will break. The minute I get a cat or dog or squirrel—or a bat—to talk—in English, their little plan is blown sky-high, that's beyond question.

She gaped at him with those great blue eyes wide.

'You mean you're going to torture animals? Trying to make them *speak*?'

'I said you'd raise a fuss.'

'Jerry, don't you see—this is a sickness, really.'

'Sure, like Pasteur's, when he talked about germs; or Einstein's, when he said space was curved; or——'

'Those other animals—the ones you—you cut up. Where did you get them?'

'I told you I live in Redwood Canyon—in a shack, to be brutally frank. I haven't had time to make a decent living and still save the stupid human race. Anyhow, there are plenty of animals there: rabbits, gophers, deer, raccoons, ground squirrels, lizards, foxes, weasels—you name 'em. When I saw one that didn't seem normal—and I don't mean just a sick or off-coloured specimen—I tried to trap or shoot it. I didn't get too far that way, and anyhow I was careless. Some nosy neighbours reported me, and I got fined and warned. It's the old story,' he added bitterly. 'The very people you're trying to help are the ones who crucify you every damned time. But now I know how to go about it, and when I'm through, I'll have evidence on tape and film that would convince anybody.'

'And you honestly feel, now, that if you torture enough of these—these different little animals, you'll make one speak in English. And you'll get the words on tape, with pictures.'

'Yes, I do,' he said defiantly. He patted the notebook in his shirt pocket. 'This tells me I'm right. Hundreds of cases. Cats that don't wash some parts of their bodies, because they can't manage the tricky stance a real cat knows from kittenhood. Cocks that fight, but never peck the ground at intervals. A mole that didn't bite the heads off the worms it caught. I could go on for hours. Some were just different, I know; but you develop an instinct after a while—or a flair. Hundreds of biologists saw what Darwin did in his travels, but he was the only one to see the vital patterns. I see a vital pattern hidden in natural aberrations. I may be wrong, but I don't think so, and the stakes are very high. Unless the world is warned, this reconnaissance could be followed by a take-over in force. But if we're ready . . .'

She looked at him in silence, then shook her head in a pitying gesture.

'Doesn't it occur to you,' she said, 'that first of all such spies wouldn't let you trap them?'

'On the contrary. Not knowing my motives, they might hope for it—deliberately walk into the traps, in order to make inside observations on a human.'

She was taken aback for a moment, then said: 'On the other hand, if they are spies, invaders, won't they kill you if you're getting at their secret?'

'They might,' he said coolly. 'But I'm hoping that as spies, they won't

carry arms; it would be risky if one were killed accidentally, by a car, say, and had some strange instrument on its body. They are here, I presume, primarily for information. I do run the risk that they can communicate over long distances; but doubt if that's so, or I'd have had trouble with the ones I captured or shot before. They'd have tipped off the others by now.'

'You certainly have all the answers,' she said in a dry voice. 'And you mean to begin torturing all kinds of little animals.'

'Not all so little. I've seen deer that weren't deer; and a bear that passed up honey.'

'Could I come by and watch?'

He was surprised, and showed it.

'Watch? But I thought—it's an unpleasant business; I don't deny that. I *must* do it, but you . . .' He broke off, and gave her a sharp stare. 'Oh, no. Is the sadism coming out? After all those pious protests, you'd enjoy some blood and squeals. Get lost, lady; you and I don't speak the same language. Beat it—remember, I didn't pick you up; it was the other way around. Go away; you make me sick!'

She stood up, so tall, slim, and lovely, with that perfect Ice Queen profile.

'You're very stupid and unfair; I hate you.'

She strode off, walking like an empress.

'The people you run into,' he said darkly. 'Are these the characters I'm trying to save? And she so clean-looking and all—ah, t'hell with her. It's a sickness, I suppose. She can't help it; but not in my lab; bad enough I have to do the dirty work, without making a free show of it.'

It was now quite dark. He got up stiffly, and walked to the jalopy. He half expected her to be sitting in it; the town was a long hike away. But she was gone. He called her name a few times, being unwilling to abandon her out here; but there was no reply. Finally he shrugged, and drove off.

The next morning, Jerry steeled himself to begin what might turn out to be a long and rather revolting investigation. But just as another fanatic, John Brown, was able to slaughter innocent and guilty alike in his crusade against slavery, which to him was sufficient justification, so this one felt that the high stakes were proper enough grounds for the abuse of helpless animals.

There was just enough doubt in his own mind to make him begin with the most promising of his five captives. The mouse, somehow, however un-rodentline its behaviour, seemed less promising as a spy,

although Jerry told himself this was foolish prejudice and the power of pre-conceived ideas. Similarly, the rabbit, with its tradition of Disney-cuteness, was almost too endearing a creature to torment. It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the one he chose to begin on—a young raccoon—was to be sacrificed because of its bandit-like appearance, complete with black mask. In a matter like this, Jerry knew very well, it was quite preposterous to judge by looks; the villainous and sly raccoon might be only a wayward member of its tribe, and the cute, bright-eyed mouse a spy-chief. Still, one had to begin somewhere.

With thick gloves, Jerry pulled the raccoon from the wire cage, and not without considerable difficulty, tied the struggling beast to a heavy table, well-fitted for the purpose with screw-eyes. It was not necessary, in the circumstances, to make the animal completely immobile as for a delicate operation, in which case an anaesthetic would be used, anyhow. It was only necessary that the raccoon be unable to escape and so frustrate the experimenter.

Then he lit the little butane welding torch, and approached the captive.

'I know you understand what I'm saying,' he told the raccoon, 'so it's no use pretending. Nothing will stop me from burning you alive, right on the table, unless you tell me, in English, just what you are, who sent you, and why—in detail. Now we understand each other, right?'

At the sound of his voice, the raccoon stopped its frantic lunges against the tough cords, and looked at him, eyes brightly feral. Then it resumed its struggles, breathing hoarsely and muttering deep in its throat.

'All right; it's your choice. We'll have to do it the hard way,' Jerry said tonelessly, his forehead suddenly damp. 'Maybe you don't know what fire feels like. Maybe on your planet accidents don't happen where people get burned badly. Maybe, even, in your real shape you don't feel pain—or can't feel it now. Maybe you'll pretend it hurts, but I have a way of knowing—which I don't intend to tell you. If you can't feel pain, I'll *know* I'm right, and push all the harder to break things wide open. . . . But first things first.'

He adjusted the flame to a blue cone, and deftly flicked it across the raccoon's left ear. The animal snarled, and then gave a whimpering little cry. It shook its head several times; the ear wiggled feverishly.

'Hurts, doesn't it?' Jerry asked. 'That was just a tiny sample. When I hold the flame right against your body, it will be quite unbearable—if you really feel anything.'

I must remember, he told himself; don't get too excited out of pity. While burning keep feeling for increased heartbeat and pulse; he won't know about hiding those, even if he pretends to be in agony. And if they show up, I'll know he's hurting badly, and may talk.

He was about to apply the flame to the raccoon's left foreleg, when the door opened behind him. He whirled, his heart sinking. If some damned nosy neighbour ever caught him at this . . .!

'You!' he said. 'I told you——'

'I had to come,' Eunice said. She looked at the tied raccoon, her blue eyes flaming with indignation. 'Oh, the poor little thing; it's just a cub!' She glared at Jerry. 'Why that one?'

'If it matters to you, or you know the difference,' he said, 'this raccoon didn't wash its food—except when it knew I was watching. It's my number one suspect as of now. Better get out of here; you won't like the beginning; but when he talks, you'll owe me a fat apology.'

'I won't go,' she said.

'I could throw you out.'

'The door doesn't even have a lock,' she said, giving the shack a contemptuous scrutiny.

'Stay if you like, but if you interfere, I warn you, I'll forget you're a girl, and knock you down if I have to.'

He stepped up to the raccoon, and held the flame against the animal's leg. A shrill, almost human scream burst from the tortured beast.

'Did that sound like a raccoon to you?' he asked the girl. 'By God, it was like nothing I've ever heard. What'll you bet——'

'How could it be normal, burning alive?' she demanded. 'You must stop this, Jerry.'

'No,' he said flatly. 'This should be the big breakthrough.' And he advanced the torch again.

Then the raccoon spoke. Its voice, in contrast with its rascally appearance, was oddly soft and well modulated, but brightly and resonantly non-human.

'It's no use,' the creature said. 'I can't bear it. And anyhow, he's bound to be a problem.'

'I agree,' Eunice said, and gulping, Jerry spun on his heel to face the little automatic directed at his face.

'Not all of us are disguised as *lower* animals,' the girl said. 'You just had to keep pushing.' Then she fired three shots into Jerry's head.

Nightquake

FOR TWO NIGHTS, lying awake in the hot, stuffy room, Joey had heard strange sounds from behind the old bureau. The noise had made him uneasy. It sounded like a mouse gnawing, but less erratic and even more persistent. There was a dogged purposefulness about the faint splintering of wood fibre that troubled him deeply. In the middle of the night he would start to abrupt consciousness at the muffled rasping inside the thick wall. With wide-open eyes fixed on the shadowy ceiling, he would wonder and wonder what was working its way so determinedly into his room.

On the fifth night, when the grating, relentless noise seemed to be nearing a climax, the child, mute from birth, managed to wrench from his straining throat the thin, quavering cry, almost inaudible, that was his only link of communication with the world about him. He made a few attempts to stir the limbs left paralyzed by his recent attack of polio, but they would not respond, and would refuse to do so for many weary months of therapy. Nobody heard his feeble cries, and finally, exhausted, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Suddenly he snapped awake, tense and sweating profusely. Something was pattering across the floor towards him. Joey raised his head on its thin neck, peering about in the faint glow of a cloudy night sky. He saw the small shadowy figure scamper to the nearest leg of the bed, and heard the rustle of its slow climb. Then it was standing on the sheet, staring at him with murky, bestial eyes glowing in a vague shape. Joey shrank, burying his face in the hot pillow.

There was the sound of heels on the landing outside—in a rippling flash of movement the creature scrambled to the floor, raced across the room, and vanished behind the bureau. Joey's mother, tiptoeing towards the bed, expecting to find him asleep, was shocked by the agonized expression on his pale, wet face.

'Joey!' she gasped. 'What's the matter? You look so—is something

wrong, dear? Are you in pain?'

She stroked his forehead, testing it for fever, as he fought to put into words—words only heard in his mind and never forced in recognizable form past his own lips—his new loathing for this room and his horror of staying in it alone.

'You shouldn't have left the hospital so soon,' she murmured helplessly. 'But they said you were wasting away there—so homesick—and the doctor—oh dear, what *can* I do with you, Joey? There's just nobody to nurse you, and I can't quit work.'

Gravely, she took his temperature, gave him water, which he gulped eagerly, and tucked him in.

Twice she started to leave the room, but the strange expression on the child's face drew her back, and at last, with a sigh of resignation, she seated herself in the armchair, scene of many a similar vigil, and prepared to wait out the long, humid summer night. She thought unhappily of unwashed dishes, linen to be sorted, and a dozen other nagging chores. Watching her tired face, Joey finally relaxed and soon fell into a light doze.

But the following night, his mother had to work. Conscious of the boy's mood, although unaware of its cause, she had provided for a sitter; but the neighbour's flighty young daughter, more interested in a boyfriend downstairs than a session in the gloomy sickroom, ignored Joey's pleading eyes and left him alone at nine. After all, she reasoned, the kid was safe enough in bed, and she'd be right at hand if anything came up.

He lay there, every muscle tense with apprehension, his ears straining for some sound near the bureau. His only hope was frequent visits on the part of the sitter. From downstairs he heard the faint noise of shrill laughter and the beat of fast music. These sounds of enjoyment made him feel all the more desolate, and he sprawled there, hating the girl for her pleasures. Why did he have to go to bed so early? 'John-e-e-e, don't!' the sitter squealed loudly, and there were scuffling noises.

At that moment he caught a sound that made his stomach heave. It was only the ghost of a rustle, coming from the open window rather than the wall. A small figure appeared on the sill, outlined fuzzily against the cloudy sky. Joey's heart stuttered wildly. Had it found another entrance? Then relief flooded his body. The visitor was just a kitten, jet black and scrawny. No doubt it had leaped from the backyard fence to the shed, and so to his window.

The kitten eyed him warily for a moment, then the whiskered jaws opened to display red gums and white needle teeth. A faint, musical cry

sounded. Joey watched, trying to coax the animal with his eyes, and pleading mentally for it to stay. At least it was company, amiable and attractive. Now it was licking one paw, following the feline adage: when in doubt, wash. Then its mind made up, the animal sprang to the floor.

For some moments, almost invisible in the shadows, it prowled about the bed, stopping once to lap a few drops of spilled milk. Finally, more interested in human companionship, the kitten made a single lithe jump of surprising power, landing squarely on the boy's thigh. Joey could move one forearm slightly, and his wasted fingers stroked the soft fur, feeling bones beneath the unpadded skin. A throaty purr followed immediately, growing in volume until the whole meagre body seemed to throb. Gradually, Joey's tenseness lessened; even the kitten's lids began to droop as the stroking became more skilful. But abruptly the green eyes flared open and the vibrant form, so soft and almost shapeless in its relaxation, hardened into wiry alertness under Joey's hand. At the same time, he heard something stir behind the bureau. The kitten slipped with supple decisiveness from the boy's grasp, crouching at the edge of the bed, staring hard, its tail-tip lashing. The child heard that now-familiar pattering as the tunneller moved across the floor. There was an oddly suggestive rhythm in its padded steps.

Then, in a single fluid motion, the black kitten soared off the bed to alight with a soft, weighty impact. There was a flurry of action on the dusty boards; a faint, grating snarl sounded, to become a squall of agony as the struggle reached its brief but intense climax. The pattering came again, and seconds later the scratch of baffled claws as the frantic kitten tried futilely to wedge itself behind the bureau. Lying full length, an inky pool against the lighter floor, it repeatedly thrust a limber paw into the narrow space.

Joey's eyes gleamed as he comprehended. Undoubtedly the skinny black kitten had routed the intruder. But his exultation was short lived. If only the kitten had managed to finish the job! How badly was the thing mauled? Would it be back again, or already dying? And what was it, anyhow? Never had he heard grownups mention anything remotely like the shape he had glimpsed twice now, although both times in very unsatisfactory light. He couldn't be sure of just what he'd seen. He knew about rats, having studied pictures of them as well as of other common animals; but this—he dropped that thread of thought as steps rang on the stairs outside.

Instantly the kitten, quick and alert, streaked across the floor, seemed to flow up to the sill, and was gone. The sitter came in, fumbling for the

light switch. Joey cringed from the naked glare. Now that her employer was due this was the place to be. The pay didn't amount to much, but the job was easy, the house right next door, and the TV didn't have to be shared with four brothers and sisters. It was just as well the kid couldn't talk; at eight they were often surprisingly good reporters, as she had learned, to her chagrin, on other occasions.

Joey's gaze remained fixed on the open window. Was the kitten gone for good? He hoped not. Maybe his mother would let him keep it. On such matters, an eloquent glance was often sufficient. Odd, he'd never thought about a pet before. But if it didn't return, he wouldn't be able to ask, even. He turned towards the girl, watching her riffle the pages of a movie magazine. His eyes were hostile. She looked at him with distaste, wrinkled her flat nose, and yawned. Five minutes later Joey's mother arrived, and the sitter hurried out to join her boyfriend, waiting discreetly around the corner.

Joey's mother was in the armchair for a brief visit, when it began to rain. First a thin drizzle, then the roar and beat of a thunderstorm. The wooden house shook as if a great beast were flailing it with enormous wet paws. She went to the window, drawing it down. Immediately the child raised his head, and a shrill whimper of protest came from his lips. She whirled in surprise. 'Joey, what in the world!' He thrust his face towards the window, the cry in his throat more urgent. 'You want it up? It'll rain in, dear—and it's sure to get chilly later.' Then, seeing his expression, 'All right, just a few inches, you funny boy.' She kissed him and went out.

The rain increased in fury; the glass streamed; and in the distance, thunder rumbled like a giant awakening in bad temper. Joey waited, wondering how this night would end. Against the raging of the storm, no plaint of his could possibly be heard downstairs. Even if he used the emergency device of nudging the water pitcher off its stand with his nose, the clatter would pass unnoticed. Besides, his mother couldn't stay here indefinitely. She would be back, of course, but only after a bath, some food, and numerous last minute tasks. In his helpless state Joey wouldn't occupy the intruder long. And those cruel, gloating eyes left no doubt as to its intentions.

He lay there, staring at those all important three inches at the bottom of the window. A long peal of thunder shook the house, and as it muttered away, there came a short lull in the drumming of the rain, as if the storm had paused for breath. Then he heard it, the scratchy movement near the bureau. There was just a hint of dragginess in the thing's

progress across the floor, but it came with a grim relentlessness the child could sense immediately.

The child cast a final glance of despair at the window. With a swoop and a howl, the rain fell in renewed fury. He didn't hear the thing scramble up upon the bed, but he felt the faint vibrations. It paused at the foot, and after one quick look, Joey turned his face to the pillow. There was nothing he could do, and he preferred not to see too clearly. He didn't know that the drenched, bedraggled form had appeared again on the sill, nor was he aware of a visual clash as ruddy, feral eyes met the luminescent green pupils of the crouching kitten. But he felt the intruder's hasty retreat, and lifting his head, saw it overtaken by a lightning charge.

Above the black kitten's snarls he heard a wailing cry of agony; then, as before, the thing tore loose, and with a staggering run, made for the bureau, only to be brought down for the last time as the kitten made a magnificent leap with every claw bared. Sharp talons drove home, and turning on its back, the kitten brought disembowelling hind paws into savage play. A final bubbling scream, strangely suggestive of a human being at a distance, then crunching sounds. There followed a thin purr, and the noise of feeding. Joey tried hard to pierce the gloom, but the corner was dark and his neck tired.

He stretched out, feeling a magic relief sweeten every nerve. The storm was dying down, and there was only the musical splash of the drainpipe. Fragrant, cool air refreshed the room.

And then the kitten was on the bed again. It stalked from Joey's feet to his shoulder, tail high and waving. He saw the bloody gash along one cheek, perilously near an eye. More intriguing by far was the thing in its jaws, which it dropped now, as if in tribute, on the boy's chest. The moon, emerging from behind a cloud, bathed it in revealing silver light. It was a tiny arm, bare, wire-muscled, and covered with silky red hairs. The little fist was clenched vice-like.

The child was peering at the arm, noting the bloody tangle of nerve and sinew at the mangled shoulder end, when the kitten snatched it and sprang to the sill.

As his mother came in and glimpsed the small black form, she uttered a faint scream. The kitten disappeared, and the woman, her mouth pursed in distaste, hastily slammed the window shut.

'Ooh!' she exclaimed. 'Did you see that, Joey? A nasty little cat almost got in here. It might have climbed on your chest and—how I hate the sneaky things! But don't be afraid—I'll have the window screened tomorrow.'

Josephus

SPRAWLED OUT IN THE sun-drenched field between the tall, golden cornstalks, Janie prattled on, certain of a sympathetic listener.

'You know, Josephus,' she said, digging her heels into the crumbly, fragrant loam, her normally piquant face grave, 'I'm not really hard to get along with. That's true, isn't it?'

Josephus apparently agreed, for he said nothing.

'Gramps and Grandma like me all right. They even want to adopt me.' She squirmed eagerly at the thought. 'Golly, won't it be great if they keep me here on the farm with you, Josephus?'

A huge dragon fly, ecstatic in the heady sun, alighted six inches from Janie's face. She watched it with a shivery delight. The stiff, iridescent wings were wholly lovely, but the reptilian, armoured body, rippling with alien rhythms, seemed sinister and menacing. She drew back nervously and the winged jewel launched itself into flight with a noiseless rustle.

'Gee,' she breathed, 'there's more things on a farm. I just gotta stay here, Josephus—and Aunt Ellen—she'll never let me. I know it. She just won't.'

Far out, beyond the ripe field, old Blackie led his flock of crows in an intricate aerial manoeuvre. 'Caw! Aw-w!' the testy veteran excoriated his followers. Obviously the exercise was unsatisfactory. Still voicing his displeasure, Blackie ordered the group to try again. They disappeared finally, bound, no doubt, for a raid on the adjoining farm.

'I'll bet that's old Blackie and his bunch,' Janie said. 'Grandpa's tried to shoot him for years and years and years. So've all the farmers. You hate crows too, don't you, Josephus? I don't hate 'em much—I think they're kinda pretty, so black and shiny. And I like the way they live, so free and all. But if you hate 'em, I guess I better. You know, Aunt Ellen's just like a crow in some ways. Even Mommie and Daddy, before—

before it happened, they called her a nasty old crow once. I remember that. But I didn't even know about crows then: I was so little.' This contemptuously from the maturity of her ten years.

'An old crow, always in black, shiny dresses, and with her face real pointy, and tiny, birdy eyes. Like that dead crow I found here yesterday. Gramps said it must've died of sickness. I told him how it was all rolled up in a ball—ugh!'

She stiffened abruptly at a distant hail, shrill and peremptory. 'That's Aunt Ellen, and I'm not supposed to be here! I guess she doesn't want us to be friends, Josephus, but I don't care; she can't stop us. We'll always be good friends.' And standing on tiptoes, Janie planted a moist kiss on the scarecrow's painted cheek. Then she sprinted for the house.

When she returned the following afternoon, her eyes were red. 'Hullo, Josephus,' she said in a listless voice. 'Did you have a hard day? Were there lots of crows to scare away? I wish I were a scarecrow myself. It's fun here in the field, I bet. Of course, there's winter—I wouldn't like that.' She paused, slender throat working convulsively. 'Know what, Josephus? I have to say goodbye. Aunt Ellen won't let Gramps and Granny adopt me. I knew she wouldn't—I said so, didn't I? Before that I was just trying to make you feel good—when I pretended we'd be together. I know how lonesome you are out here with nobody to talk to, or anything. If I was living on the farm, I'd keep you company. Besides'—shyly—'I'm kinda lonesome, too. It's real bad of her—real bad! And Grandpa says you're a *good* scarecrow. He says you're the best scarecrow in the whole county. The crows won't come near his farm, Grandpa says. Even old Blackie stays away, and he's the worst of the lot.

'If I could live here, I'd help you chase away the crows. Honest I would. But Aunt Ellen—I don't know why she won't let me stay. She doesn't love me one little bit. Mom and Dad wanted Grandpa to have me if anything ever happened. I heard them say so one night when they thought I was sleeping. I tried to tell the judge. Know what I think, Josephus? She doesn't want to lose the *money*. She gets a whole two hundred dollars a month of Daddy's money for me! I hate her! Old black crow!' Quietly then, 'I'd like to kill her. If she was dead, Gradpa'd take me—I just *know* it.'

After a brooding silence, Janie said: 'Course I couldn't keep you company at night, even if I lived here. But I suppose you sleep then, don't you, Josephus? Or is that when you walk around? It must be awful hard standing in one place all day. Nobody can blame you for walking around at night. Anyway, they don't know. You're always so careful to

come back to just the same, same spot. But I can tell. Yesterday your left boot was just touching that big, blue stone; today it's not. Course, the wind blows you so—your arms and legs are awful fluttery.

'What do you do at night, Josephus? I bet you have a good stretch first, and it feels wonderful. Like getting up after a nice sleep—a real sleepy sleep; you know what I mean—smelling the bacon and pancakes. And then you run down the corn rows, scaring off rabbits and coons, kicking out with those big old boots. And when everything is chased away from Grandpa's corn, maybe you walk down to the creek for a long, cool drink. It's awful hot here in the sun all day, I bet. They said I shouldn't ever drink from the creek—it's p'luted—but that wouldn't hurt *you*.'

She jumped up and grabbed one of the scarecrow's clumsy hands, a ragged cloth glove stuffed with straw. 'See, this is still damp. You dipped up water in it last night, didn't you, Josephus? But I don't know what you drank it with; your mouth's only painted on. Gee, Joey—this glove's all dirty and gooey-brown.

'If I could stay, I'd wash your clothes. All of 'em, I would. No, I'd get you new clothes, even white gloves. Wouldn't that be peachy? Golly!' She stood tall in a strained position. 'Who's coming? It's Aunt Ellen! I better scoot, Josephus. She'll tan my bottom again. I promised not to come here any more. She's mad at you, too. Bye!' Her slight form vanished among the towering plants . . .

Aunt Ellen, hot and sticky in her black dress, felt a pang of disappointment as she glimpsed the scarecrow. There was no Janie about after all. Surely the little sneak must have come. Where else could she be? Her thin lips tightened, so that the clumsily outlined lipstick stood out like a painted mouth unrelated to her own. The child was around somewhere. Would it be worthwhile to try to catch her? Should she try?

The sun was so strong. Maybe if she just crouched down here where she could watch the scarecrow, Janie might be trapped. A rather silly lot of trouble, but it would show the maudlin old grandparents that Janie was a lying brat. They were siding with the girl again—the entire atmosphere was quite unpleasant. She'd planned to spend another month on the farm—you saved money, and it wasn't bad here—but their absurd attitude was making it impossible. The child would soon be unmanageable.

She sat down stiffly, reaching for one of her rare cigarettes. After lighting one, she conscientiously blew out and broke the match. The field was dry, and they'd warned her. Puffing restlessly, her expression

sulky, she studied the scarecrow. Odd, how its arms hung down; most scarecrows held them out horizontally. Yes, it almost seemed as if the ungrateful child preferred this straw man to her own kin. For two cents she'd leave Janie with the old folks. Would, too, only—after all, she was earning that two hundred dollars, and it wouldn't be easy to get along without it.

A flock of crows swept by, cawing harshly. Although they dipped momentarily towards the field, all but one sheered off. The single exception, big, glossy, and arrogant, dived down, alighting not five feet from the scarecrow. The leader raved at him, circling, but the rebel gave a brief derisive croak and fell to, showing a hearty appetite.

Aunt Ellen smiled maliciously. So that was the great scarecrow Grandpa bragged about. A crow pecking at the corn practically on top of the fool thing. Watching it, she found her gaze blurring, and felt distressingly conscious of the hammering heat. It wasn't wise to sit here long; the sun was too powerful. A child was packed with vitality; a girl like Janie could frolic in the soggiest weather, while her elders drooped miserably even in the shade. Not for an old spinster, such energy; she wasn't built that way. The field danced before her eyes.

Suddenly she tensed, staring incredulously. Was that a heat flicker, or had the scarecrow MOVED? There was no breeze, yet it had seemed for a second as if the thing made a single streaking motion, bending far over, and—where was that lone, insolent crow?

Absurd idea. Naturally, it was the heat plus the subtle influence of Janie's childish fancies. Determinedly, Aunt Ellen scrambled to her feet and strode down the narrow lane between the ranked stalks. No use wasting more time on the wilful girl. A closer look at the scarecrow her niece preferred to real folks, and then back to the house to begin packing.

She was dripping and fretful when she arrived at her goal. No point in bothering, that was plain. Same as any other scarecrow, just as she might have known. Holding her cigarette in one lean hand, she surveyed Josephus critically. Head—a coarse flour sack stuffed with something or other; probably chaff. Badly painted face, although the ruddy eyes did have a sinister squint that added character of a sort. Plump, lopsided body of blanketing draped in a rusty old swallowtail coat; pants of stiffened canvas; and feet that wore flamboyant boots of cracked patent leather. And those outsize work gloves—why, one of them was trickling crimson, shimmering black and moist red showing between the awkwardly clenched fingers.

Fascinated, Aunt Ellen thrust the cigarette hastily back into her mouth, and wrenched at the secretive fist with both hands. Reluctantly the flaccid fingers opened; something fell out, raising a puff of dust as it struck the ground. She gaped at it, there on the sunbaked earth, and her cigarette dropped alongside in a shower of sparks. A crushed crow, beady eyes bulging insanely; feathers dabbled with blood; the whole sleek, vital mechanism mashed to a grotesque lump of carrion.

The woman gave a little gasp, and her heart hammered unbearably. For a second she swayed, but the iron in her triumphed, and she turned to go.

But it seemed to her that boneless, tenacious fingers were lapping her corded throat, paralyzing limbs and will. Aunt Ellen died very quickly, and the last thing she saw was a painted, leering face staring into her own.

She died in seconds; too soon to see the dry, tindery undergrowth whisper into flames about the scarecrow's great boots. Too soon to see fire claw up the straw-filled cloth, lick at the tightening fingers that seemed to paw the flames, crackling its grim finale with smoke wreathing a painted smile. The scarecrow writhed on its firmly rooted stick as if trying to tear free. In a few moments there was only a blackened stub surrounded by glowing ashes of a fire that had not spread.

Soon, from the western sky came an exultant cawing as Blackie led his ravenous flock down on the juicy, ripe ears.

The way was clear.

Mystery and Magic on the Steppe

TUGAI BEY AND HIS NEPHEW, Burlai Khan, scouting well ahead of the Horde as ordered, found one small farm in a sheltered valley among the foothills, a rather rare configuration on the vast, level steppes. It was the first human habitation in many versts of featureless plain.

They dismounted from their shaggy little ponies, and horn reflex bows in hand, stalked the area, two dark men, short and muscular, wary and savage as any two wild animals. It was a poor enough place: a few patches of spindly wheat, one bony cow, a few chickens, and a sod hut for the family of three.

The Tartars cautiously skirted the farm on all sides, found no neighbours to worry about, and made their plans accordingly, being experienced scouts. The farmer, a burly Slav, was working in the field with a boy of perhaps twelve, no doubt his son. They were unarmed except for their crude hoes; obviously, this region had known peace of late. Certainly, no Horde had come this way for some years.

The woman, gaunt and juiceless, was plucking a scrawny hen while her baby, still to young to walk, played in the dirt at her feet, softly prattling.

The two barbarians exchanged several cryptic grunts. As expert raiders they had developed a single, effective routine, requiring only a few basic signals. They fitted arrows to their short but immensely powerful bows, and struck. Neither the farmer nor his son, the only possible fighters in the family, could have been aware of what was happening to them. At that short range, from solid ground instead of galloping ponies, the two Tartars could have split wands. The whistling arrows drove deep into the victims' bodies, and they died where they stood, uncomprehending and almost instantaneously. With uncouth cries of exultation, the scouts moved in on the terrified woman, frozen in place.

They were well aware that they must not burden themselves with captives, no matter how desirable as slaves: mobility and distance covered were the watchwords of this operation. Tugai Bey dashed the baby's brains out against a rock; his nephew, grinning savagely at this welcome opportunity to indulge himself, strangled the mother, too traumatized by the fate of her infant to struggle, or, perhaps, even to care.

After that, they butchered the cow and gorged on burnt gobbets of meat, for they had long subsisted on grain, supplemented by a few ounces of warm blood from the veins of their mounts. Burlai Khan would have torched the wheat, but his uncle, wiser in war, restrained him. Why alert other settlers farther away by making a lot of smoke? The leaders of the Horde couldn't object to their scouts' enjoyment of a brief, murderous diversion here but would strongly resent their warning the whole countryside that the barbarians were on the move. There was thought to be a sizeable walled town ahead, replete with gold and women; it would be a fine place to investigate and plunder. So let the grain stand for now.

It was late in the afternoon before they found a second farm. This one was even smaller and less prosperous than the first, since it was a one-man operation. There were only a few square yards under cultivation and no livestock; and the hut was a tiny, rickety lean-to. Their reconnoitering revealed only one inhabitant, a feeble old man, pulling up weeds with twisted arthritic fingers. His posture, skinny rear towards the barbarians, was very inviting, suggesting the brutal sort of practical joke that delighted them. Tugai Bey, grinning and nodding towards his nephew, had already drawn an arrow to its head, intending to feather it squarely in the farmer's backside, when the younger man gave a little gasp and clutched his uncle's shoulder. Irritably Tugai Bey gently relaxed the bow string and, weapon dangling from one chunky hand, peered in the direction his nephew indicated. He, too, sucked in his breath at the sight. A large snow leopard, one of the rarest of the big cats, the gorgeous fur of which was highly prized, was stalking the old man. It was seldom that these solitary predators came down from the mountains; only in times of famine, when game was scarce, were they found under a height of ten thousand feet.

They watched it with profound interest and anticipation, wondering about its presence here, in the flatlands. But in any case, whatever the reason, this promised to be far more fun than transfixing the farmer with a barbed shaft. And after the old man was torn apart, their arrows

would skewer the leopard. The magnificent pelt of silver grey with brown rosettes, apparently in prime condition, thick and fluffy, would be a splendid trophy.

They could hear the farmer muttering to himself as he worked, occasionally chanting in a cracked voice, oblivious to the dangerous animal behind him. The two Tartars crouched, full of malicious glee, as the bushy-tailed cat, stretched full length on the brown soil, glided nearer to its intended prey. They saw it pause, gather its powerful hind legs under its body, and prepare to pounce, every flat, sinuous muscle tense. The dark claws worked in the white sheaths of its big paws as if anticipating the rending to come.

Then, to their amazement, the farmer whirled, showed yellow, broken teeth in a grin, and waved one hand in mock reproof. The snow leopard, seeming oddly abashed, relaxed, rolled upon its back, and purred so loudly they could hear it even from their position many yards away. The old man went to the cat, rubbed its belly, tugged playfully at the fluffy tail, and returned to his weeding.

Completely awed, the scouts stared at each other. Surely this was magic. Never in all their wanderings had they seen anything like it. There were ponies with the Horde, of course, the product of many generations of association, and a few dogs, but who ever heard of a snow leopard subservient to a man? Yes, this old man must be a mighty wizard, perhaps his true shape that of a fearsome goblin. Tugai Bey shuddered as he thought of the shaft he had almost loosed at this sorcerer, and was glad that his nephew had intervened in time. Why, by now the pseudo-farmer in his wrath might have turned them both into rocks or even lumps of horse dung. To nomads that was a dreadful fate, since it meant, other matters aside, an end to the mobility they cherished.

But now his nephew gave a little grunt of surprise. It was incredible enough that the old man had tamed and enslaved a ferocious predator, but what was this? Around the lean-to came a small dog, a black, shaggy mongrel with intelligent, humorous eyes. It ran up to the leopard, barked brightly, and crouched, tail wagging, obviously unafraid of the big cat.

The farmer looked at them, and when the leopard seemed reluctant to respond, said, 'Very well, my dear children—play. But you, Winter, be very careful. I know you love Blackberry, and would never wish to hurt him, but you have been careless lately, and those paws of yours are strong. So be extra gentle or I may have to stop the game. Now you may romp,' and he pointed one authoritative finger at the odd pair.

The concealed Tartars, familiar with many Slavic dialects, understood the gist of his words, and their wonder grew. The sorcerer talked to the beasts; they seemed to know what his commands were, and obeyed them. Obviously, the leopard had waited for permission before daring to play with the little dog. A natural predator, fierce and untamable, taking orders from a frail old man; this was magic of a high sort, and undoubtedly the farmer was not what he seemed but a powerful demon in disguise—but why the feeble body, unless it was to trap observers into rash action which could be met with terrible consequences for the sorcerer's amusement?

Right now the two animals were frolicking like puppies. The mongrel would charge the leopard, barking in mock ferocity; the big cat, back humped, whiskers bristling, spat and snarled as if actually intimidated. Then one broad paw, its claws carefully retracted, shot out in a streaking motion too fast for most of its prey to counter. The little dog was gently flattened into helplessness. For a moment the snow leopard pressed its captive against the ground, unable to move; then Blackberry whimpered his submission and rather reluctantly was freed. Immediately the game began again, with variations.

The scouts continued to watch, their astonishment growing. It was well known to all that a leopard's favourite food was dog. Many of the camp's mongrels had been taken whenever the Horde passed near the higher ranges. Yet here were mortal enemies playing together; only sorcery could account for it, and their fear of the pseudo-farmer increased.

Meanwhile the old man, weary and aching, retreated to the shade of the lean-to and sat down, his back against the side of the structure. He watched his two pets with a benevolent, almost foolish expression. His rheumy eyelids drooped, and he drooled a little.

It was time, the Tartars felt, either to withdraw or reveal themselves. Surely the magician was aware of their presence; no concealment could deceive such a master. If they lingered, without doing him honour, he might well blast them; his kind were touchy. So, after a hasty whispered exchange, they decided to go forward and do him homage.

As they approached the old man, their belief in this power grew, for instead of fear and flight, the normal reaction of civilians to their appearance, he just sat there, waiting for them, and the naïve smile on his wrinkled face deepened.

'Welcome, brothers,' he greeted them in a cracked, wavering voice. 'I have little to offer visitors, but there are wheatcakes in the hut, some

fermented milk.' The pair, still gorged on beef from the ravaged farm, were not interested in such poor fare. Instead Tugai Bey pointed to the animals, which, after pausing briefly to appraise the strangers, were again frolicking.

'You must be a mighty sorcerer,' the scout said in his vile but comprehensible Slavic, 'to converse with such a beast as the leopard and give it orders so that it sports with its natural prey instead of devouring it.'

The old farmer smiled. 'It is the simplest magic of all,' he said. 'Anybody can practise it, but alas, few do, preferring hate and conflict. The magic of love. I love them, and they love each other. Nothing more is needed.

Baffled, the scouts eyed him, expecting some elaboration of that bizarre statement.

'I do not understand that,' Tugai Bey grunted. 'Love is not sorcery. A man may love his father, his brother, maybe his chief, or perhaps, for a time, a woman, but that is natural, not magic.'

'Yes, it is,' the old man persisted. 'Because of it you see a ferocious beast, a born blood-drinker, playing joyously, in all innocence, with a small, helpless thing he could smash with a single blow and eat with relish. Love is the sorcerer here, not I. Even when I am dead—which will soon be the case, since I am very old and tired—these two would be as brothers from the same litter. Some day,' he added, 'this same magic will make all men live together in peace and harmony.' He was silent then, recalling muzzily the tiny leopard cub he had found years ago and reared with the black pup.'

'I fear, nephew,' Tugai Bey whispered, 'that this old sorcerer is unwilling to share any of his knowledge with us. Instead he speaks in riddles, and shows his contempt. Well, since he is not mortal, and holds great power, there is nothing we can do about it; it would be very dangerous to offend him.' He spoke in their own guttural tongue, and the farmer, still lost in the past, let his eyelids sag once more.

'Surely an arrow through the heart can kill even a magician,' Burlai Khan said.

'You speak like a fool. It would glance off. Or even if it pierced him, he would just pluck it out, laughing, and visit a dreadful revenge upon us. And in his true, fearsome shape.' He glanced at the sun and said, 'We have wasted enough time here. You wait, without annoying him I warn you, while I climb that hill to see what lies ahead.' And he strode off with the choppy, awkward steps of a horseman to mount his pony.

Burlai Khan idly watched the two animals, now lying down several yards apart, then addressed the farmer. He had to raise his voice before the sorcerer's eyes opened. It seemed to the young, vigorous barbarian that this magician was indeed terribly old and weak. Maybe he should follow his uncle now. What if this strange being desired his strong young body and took it over, leaving him trapped in that worn-out husk—or as a forlorn wraith with no physical presence? He felt a surge of panic at the thought.

'Great One,' he murmured, 'be not angry with me for asking, but is it true that if I drove an arrow through your heart, you would not die like a normal man but only pluck it out?'

The old man looked up, filmy eyes open now, but said nothing. The sweet, fatuous smile touched his lips, but that was the only response.

'Would you show me how it's done? That would be something to tell around the evening fires. Say yes, I beg of you.' He was unused to asking instead of taking, and the plea almost choked him.

The farmer look vaguely bewildered, but aware of some request. His eyes clouded still more, but at last he spoke, replying with a sort of query, however. 'Yes, what? Yes, young man, whatever you wish. My home is yours. We are brothers, as all men are or will be some day.'

To Burlai Khan this was permission enough. What a tale to tell! That he had sent an arrow through the heart of a great sorcerer and seen him yank it out, grinning, as the wound healed instantly.

The old man's eyes were completely closed now, so he didn't see the short, heavy arrow locked. The scout moved back a dozen feet, drew the shaft to its cruelly barbed head, and cried, 'I'm ready, master. You still permit?'

The old man said softly, eyes still shut, 'Do as you like, brother. . . .'

On the word the bowstring twanged, and the arrow nailed the farmer's slight body, shrunken by the years, to the wall of the hut.

The young Tartar, anxious to observe the miracle at closer range, ran forward. There was very little blood, but that was only to be expected; the arrow's shaft tended to block the free flow. But the sorcerer's eyes remained closed, and he neither moved nor spoke when the scout gingerly tapped his shoulder.

'Take out the arrow now,' the Tartar urged him. 'Now, O great sorcerer. Pull it out and return to life as you promised me.' But the old man didn't stir, and a feeling of panic overwhelmed the youth. The magician must be angry after all and wasn't going to oblige. Instead, he obviously meant to remain a corpse until it pleased him to live again.

What had Burlai Khan done wrong? Something, it seemed, and even now the old man might be plotting some horrific act of reprisal. With a choked cry, the scout ran to his pony, scrambled into the saddle, and galloped off to find his uncle.

As he rode away, the black mongrel trotted up to his master, stood whimpering at his feet, then climbed into the farmer's lap. His pink tongue caressed the still face, frozen in a smile. Then he jumped down and ran about, barking shrilly.

For a moment the leopard stood there, scrutinzing the frantic dog; then it moved in on padded feet to sniff curiously at the farmer's wound, its yellow, opalescent eyes aglow. Blackberry ran up to it, whining, seeming to beg for consolation.

Briefly the great cat studied the frantic mongrel. Then, with a single oblique stare at the corpse, he thrust out a tentative paw, claws sheathed, and pinned the dog to the earth. The captive whined in protest, unwilling to play in this hour of loss. He squirmed vainly against the pressure, crying more loudly.

Then, very slowly, with gloating relish, the snow leopard brought its keen, bluish talons out, and the little dog yelped in agony as they drew blood. Putting its other forepaw on the black head, the big cat casually eviscerated its long-time playmate. It dipped its rough tongue into the crimson pool, lapping greedily. A low, grating sound came from its throat. It was purring.

The Lonesome Game

LINDA BEGAN TO AWAKE very slowly, moving up like a drifting balloon from a bottomless well of oblivion, black and terribly silent. She had never been one to open her eyes in the morning and snap to full alertness on the instant. Rather, Linda had always enjoyed the languorous interval that extended from dreamless sleep to sharp awareness—to the caress of silky bedclothes, the sound of mockers trilling in their virtuoso style outside, the scent of perking coffee that chuckled while spreading its aroma. Only after savouring the pleasant transition would she gradually open her eyes to the room itself.

Today the enjoyment went even further in its witchery. For the first time in years she remembered the Lonesome Game, and was moved to play a favourite version. There were a number of these, almost forgotten, but now, with this slow awakening, details became clear in her memory.

On chilly autumn evenings, for example, as a girl of ten, she preferred the Voyage. That involved a long walk by the river, rich with poignant night fragrances. She would not return until after dark, pretending it was from some vague, distant journey across the sea. She could not be sure that the old redwood house would be there, or even if Mom and Dad were still alive when she came home. Her heart would be pounding with delicious anticipation—and carefully nurtured fears—as she rounded the last corner. Yes, the house was standing, warmly lit, inviting. But were they really in it, after all these weary years, wondering what had happened to Linda, gone for so long? Was she ever coming home?

It was invariably a letdown then, to have Mom look up from her book, and say mildly, 'I do wish you'd get back before dark, dear.' Just as if Linda had been for a stroll instead of appearing so dramatically, without any warning, after a long, long visit to foreign lands!

This morning, though, was no time for the Voyage, but rather for the Strange Awakening version of the Lonesome Game, which she had so

often played as a child. It called for lying very quietly in bed, refusing to open her eyes even a tiny bit, and pretending to be doubtful of her surroundings. By keeping her arms tightly pressed against her sides and holding herself rigid, Linda could make the soft, familiar bed seem altogether strange, so that when she did peek the room would be quite different, a mysterious change having taken place while she slept. Then even the mockingbirds would sound like those weird singers in African jungle movies, all croaks and bells and hoots, and the smell of coffee would seem more like that of some exotic brew unknown in America, even to gourmets. A silly game, but it was such fun, and so reassuring to open her eyes at last to a well-known and loved place.

Yes, she would play it now, even as a girl of twenty. Girl? No, a woman. Why, how could she have forgotten! Today was her birthday: twenty years old on May 18. What was that bittersweet little scene in *Tales of Hoffman*, where the evil doctor, having called for Antonia's age, sings 'Only twenty! Why the Springtime of youth . . .' And she doomed by him—made to sing when she was so ill. . . .

Linda screwed her lids down more tightly. Well, nobody was going to ruin her springtime, or her lovely date last night. Brian Macrea, the B.M.O.C., no less, had called for her in his new car, and she'd had her third drink of imported champagne, too; several, in fact. Why not? Brian was loaded; best catch in town, and she had him sewed up. What if he knew his girl of twenty was playing the Strange Awakening this very morning? And he thinks I'm so mature! But then, she defended herself, arms firmly against her sides, eyes still shut, it's the first time in years—because I'm so happy, it must be.

The Lonesome Game was working, too. The bed felt harder than normal; the mockingbirds were oddly still—sometimes they sang all night, a most unbirdlike habit. But she could smell coffee; that must be done perking. It did have a very sharp overscent, however—a strange brew from where? Atlantis, across the sea; not coffee, but a similar drink with other ingredients; that explained the off flavour.

The Lonesome Game was working too well. Linda shivered. She wasn't ten any more. Why this conviction that the room *was* different, that there had been some crazy, impossible transformation while she slept? And so sound a sleep, not to hear the coffee perking, but to awake only after it was done. Briefly it was confusing.

Yet that was natural; she'd been out late; they'd gone everywhere, she and Brian . . . and then parked a long time by the river . . . he was just rough enough to be masculine . . . they could hit it off if only that

proposal were in the cards . . . she was quite sure to be Homecoming Queen; that had its points in catching a husband . . . nor was it just vanity to feel that she, Linda Jean Ballinger, was the prettiest girl in town; everybody had always said so since she was sixteen . . . How I ramble! she told herself, sinking deeper in the bed, and actually recapturing the slightness and fragility of childhood . . . I must wake up and get moving: today's my birthday . . . party tonight . . .

Her lids were heavy; they didn't want to lift, and Linda was suddenly a little frightened. It's only that I'm not really awake yet, she assured herself. That's happened before. You think the sleep is over, but are only passing from one dream level to another. I'll force myself out of this half-doze. . . .

Then she heard voices nearby. Mom and Dad? No, two women talking; one loud, the other soft and sweet. Company? Not in the morning; not with Mom—house immaculate first. Unless I've slept until noon . . . that possible? . . . I did get home awfully late . . . or did I? . . . don't even remember . . . too much wine? . . . I hope not—Dad will be furious . . . but I'm twenty today, a grown woman . . . and one has privileges on a birthday . . . I'm very clear-headed for a dream; odd. . . .

'In here,' the loud voice said. 'A tragic case, Sister. Out on a date; night before her birthday, poor thing. Her boyfriend was drunk; he crashed a new car. D.O.A.—dead on arrival, he was.'

Linda listened, wondering, letting her lids stay down. Morbid gossip, the kind she hated. Why not stick to good things? There were so many. Death was unpleasant. What was Mom up to, inviting such people? And who was the 'case' in the other bedroom? This was no nursing home; the room was for guests.

Linda opened her eyes at last, but this time the Lonesome Game, in its Strange Awakening form, went on: walls dirty white; smell of some sharp antiseptic mingling with that of strong coffee; and this was *not* her bed, but a hard, narrow cot.

She got her arms free, and with much effort brought them to her face . . .

'Yes,' the loud woman just outside the door said. 'She's been here the longest. Way before my time. Not a relation left. Brain damage, you know, Sister Ursula. Keeps them in a coma. Just a vegetable. And today's her birthday.'

The soft voice said something very low.

'No, she'll not wake up, Sister . . . unless . . . sometimes at the very

end, the mind gets quite clear for just a few minutes . . . as if death had special power. . . .'

Linda's fingers touched her wrinkled cheeks, old and flaccid; her hands she now saw plainly, and they were gnarled, veiny, hooked. . . .

Two women, one a nun, were standing by the bed. Sister Ursula's eyes, soft and brown as melted caramel, met Linda's gaze, so full of terrible urgency.

'Why, she's awake!' the nun cried.

Then Linda's eyes closed and the Lonesome Game was ended.

The Forerunner

I DON'T REMEMBER the exact night it started, probably a Sunday. I think so, because I was worried about getting up Monday morning after a sleepless night.

Now let me admit right here that I don't know much about birds in general, and nothing whatever about the California variety. People here like to pretend the state is unique, but I didn't suspect that even the birds believed it. I always thought they retired early, carrying on most of their activities between dawn and dusk. At least, that's how birds behave back in Illinois.

But Sunday, about eleven at night, I heard the wildest racket in the trees back of my apartment. It seemed as if a whole flock of birds was having a rowdy convention, with every delegate passionately trying to outscream all the others. It went on for hours: chirps, twitters, trills, and quasi-human cacklings. I tossed around, swearing fretfully, until dawn, when the meeting finally broke up.

It wouldn't have meant much, except that the next night, right on schedule, they started again. Maddening. I shut all the windows at two, preferring suffocation, but the shrill, raucous sounds sliced through every barrier. I managed to doze off about five, my face buried in the hot pillow, and one arm muffling my right ear.

That morning I met a fellow sufferer at the bus-stop, and we exchanged commiserations. He insisted there was only one bird, but that it was a prime specimen. Mockingbirds, he informed me, often acted like that, and this must be their William Jennings Bryan.

At first, I thought his explanation fantastic. One bird, indeed! More like a mass meeting. But by the end of the week I realized that there were never two notes sounding at once, and that what seemed like a noisy congregation was only a single bird with more endurance than Callas. I soon became sickeningly familiar with every note of that intolerable serenade.

It was almost the same pattern each time, and the soloist simply screamed in a way I'd never heard from any bird before. Every note was charged with emotion, but which one, it was impossible to say. There were times when I felt that the creature was literally insane, and raving. After all, even a lower animal can lose its wits; dogs have been made psychotic, a ghastly penalty for associating with man.

But then I'd conclude that a king size bellyache was the answer—that the bird was in pain. You can't always distinguish pain from pleasure or fear from rage. Take amorous cats, for example. If you didn't know better, you'd think they loathed the whole business, and were unanimously yearning for an age of artificial insemination. But there's no shortage of kittens in my neighbourhood.

The volume this bird had was truly amazing. Something like a parakeet singing through a high powered public address system; and yet with some oddly human tones at times. From midnight until dawn it never let up for even a moment, except to fly off a few hundred feet occasionally, still shrieking.

Now I'm no bird lover; never have been; and being stuck with a Signal Corps pigeon outfit—one of the last—during the war didn't help, although I had to learn a good deal about the temperamental messengers. When addled old ladies talk about exterminating cats on behalf of our feathered friends, it makes me sick. Some birds are more cruel than any cat; take seagulls, for instance. Ever notice how they treat sick or injured animals? But neither do I hate birds. In a mild way I like them; they're pretty and chipper, and sing pleasantly enough—by day.

But this particular one I detested, and with reason. For almost two weeks I got less than three hours' sleep a night, which is plenty rough when your desk's loaded with detail-work. I tell you, that bird was absolutely frenzied; it kept the whole neighbourhood awake, and there appeared to be no remedy.

Many times I heard people in the building across the court swearing savagely in the small hours. Windows were always slamming shut, but it's summer, and soon they'd go up again. Of course, there are always a few who sleep through anything. Not me; I lay there blaspheming, occasionally falling into a fitful doze.

I got to know the song very well, having had good training in music. Few people have what is called perfect pitch; I'm one of them. Although the basic themes never changed, there were remarkable variations. Sometimes the trilling was succeeded by a series of short, jarring whis-

tles; other times a staccato, metallic clucking came next; and frequently almost human yelps of gloating.

There was one rhythmic, heavily accented passage, however, that was the real theme. I quickly memorized it—not willingly, you understand—and could whistle every note right now. It recurred constantly, leit-motif fashion, and I learned it well, without any effort.

Here's a sidelight, an irrelevance about the song, for what it's worth. I'm convinced it has meaning, as you'll see. Anyhow, I dozed off once, and had a vivid dream about the singing. The sky was flushed with pure, pulsing light that tingled, and the air was like a million gardens on a June morning. The song was no longer a nagging torment, but a mighty, triumphant hymn; and in the dream I felt as if tender fingers were loosening the rough, chafing bonds that strangled my spirit. Somewhere a great tower clock struck in flame—it was the Hour, I knew, and rejoiced. When I awoke, there was a woman sobbing in the next apartment. I don't know what all that meant, but the dream is still bright in my memory, and makes me almost sick with a kind of hopeless longing. As if, for a brief moment, I had been some place, maddeningly near, yet out of reach, where hate, fear, and cruelty are unknown, and things are right.

At the end of two weeks the weird performance was still going on. One silly woman actually phoned the Health Department; someone else tried the Humane Society, offering the bright suggestion that the bird be painlessly trapped and released elsewhere—Florida, probably. Neither organization was much interested. Night after night, beginning about eleven, and lasting until five, that lone bird sang its fantastic message.

Monday I was trying something new: ear plugs. I hoped they'd do the trick, although there was some danger of missing my alarm at six. I was wrong. The bird had a voice nothing could muffle. After an hour of annoying fullness in my ears, I took the plugs out and hurled them across the room. Then I put the bedlamp on, and got my copy of *Bracebridge Hall*, which never fails to soothe. But I couldn't seem to read; I was dead tired, and the grating, insistent noise made it impossible to concentrate. It just didn't seem possible that a mere bird, a few ounces of feathers, could produce such a volume of sound all night with practically no breathing spells. A man's vocal chords would have swelled painfully to silence under half the punishment this hag-ridden creature was inflicting upon itself.

Completely disgusted, I put out the light again, and lay back, gritting my teeth in a futile paroxysm of resentment.

At that moment I heard a chain-lock rattle, and held my breath.

Somehow I knew what was coming. The bird had just begun its hundredth repetition of that leit-motif, and suddenly the emotion made sense; it was exaltation, immense and towering.

Then it happened. There was the crashing thunder of a heavy shotgun, and a brief, agonized squawk. I heard a man's sharp bark of triumph: 'Got the son-of-a——, by God!' and the valedictory slam of a door. A woman screamed faintly; lights flashed on in a dozen windows; and there was a swell of intense, low-voiced conversation.

How he hit the bird in the dark, I can't imagine. Probably he aimed up at the sound and let fly with both barrels, trusting to the natural spread of the shot. For that matter, nobody knows, or seems to care, who fired the gun. I expected to hear the prowl car sirens almost immediately, but for some reason the police never came. Apparently everybody within earshot understood what had happened, and being completely in sympathy with the marksman, saw no point in complaining. Before long, all the lights flicked out, and a grateful silence blanketed the community.

When everything was quiet, I slipped on a jacket, took a small flashlight, and went furtively down the back stairs into the yard. My motivation is still obscure; perhaps I was influenced by that dream; certainly I had no clear notion what might follow.

For some time my search was fruitless. Then, clear in the small circle of light, I saw a patch of eye-catching, startling colour.

The great, parrot-like bird lay still, but its unwinking, yellow-irised eyes were menacingly hooded, and a thin, feral hissing came from the wickedly hooked beak. I gazed at my discovery. One hardly expects to find a bird with rainbow plumage and all the earmarks of some exotic origin in a city yard.

It did seem to me, however, that I was getting into something rather disconcerting. It is one thing to administer compassionate first aid to a small songbird, but another matter entirely to tackle a creature the size of a fighting cock, and owning a horny bill powerful enough to pulverize a marble. For a moment—but no longer—I felt like setting my foot squarely upon that fierce, uncompromising head. But it was merely a fleeting, unworthy thought, born of sleeplessness and irritation.

Instead, I slipped out of my jacket, edged closer, and with a single quick motion, muffled the unwilling patient. It was like holding a bag of angry serpents; the thing fought desperately for its freedom, ripping the lining like paper, but I held fast.

Once back in the apartment, I made a careful examination, finding

the only injury to be a broken wing. Thanks to my work with pigeons, I was able to fix it with a splint, although I lost my temper and a bit of thumb in the process of ministering to it.

I fastened the bird by one leg, using a piece of rope, to a heavy table, on which it perched, hissing defiance. Its magnificent plumage brightened the whole dingy little room, and I studied my prize with approval. I had already decided to keep him. What a pet the thing would make when tame and companionable. Kindness and food should do the trick.

'Joseph,' I said coaxingly. 'Hello, Joseph.' Somehow the name seemed inevitable for so evangelistic a bird with its coat of many colours.

But the golden eyes were implacable, and when I tried to tempt his appetite with fruit and nuts, Joseph merely snapped his great beak warningly without accepting.

It was all the more surprising then, when after a month of armed truce, I heard Joseph actually muttering a few words in English. For some reason I had never associated his parrot-like appearance with the normal talent for mimicry.

Delighted with this development, I tried to teach him some simple phrases, but he just glowered at me with contemptuous, gem-bright eyes, his beak poised for a lightning nip. Only once did he speak again that day, and then he muttered two words I'd never used at all: 'hope' and 'waiting'.

At the end of the second week of fruitless coaching, there was an unusually bright moon, which seemed to agitate Joseph greatly.

And that night my dream returned, stronger than ever. I heard the noble hymn thunder over the horizon. I awoke with a wrenching start to find Joseph shrieking frantically at the very end of his chain. I recognized the leit-motif at once, and my heart began to pound with a kind of fearful anticiapation.

Three times the fanatic theme rang out, unmistakable in its soaring beat. Then, without a pause, and in precisely the same rhythm, the excited bird cried: 'He's coming! Coming soon! He's coming!'

Joseph stood tensely erect upon his perch. His massive head was flung back; his magnificent wings were spread wide, their harsh, rich colours cold fire in the moonlight.

'He's coming! Coming soon! He's coming!'

The paean broke in a gasping sob, and the bird shrank to a ruffled ball, wheezing; then he strained upright once more, opening his wings and fighting for breath. The shadow of his quivering form flickered on

the walls. I lunged forward, but too late. With a last wailing cry, Joseph toppled and was dead.

It couldn't have been the broken wing, already well mended. It seems to me that death came through a kind of swelling exaltation that shattered the sturdy body as flame splits a granite boulder.

But I wish that Joseph had spoken a few more words.

I'd like to know Who is coming—and when.

Modelled in Clay

OF COURSE, IT'S JUST a coincidence,' said Mrs Bryce.

'I never suggested anything else,' Bryce protested plaintively.

'I'm not crazy. Still, I can't help thinking what a wonderful thing it would be if——'

'—if Tommy's models always had such an effect!' she finished, with a delighted chuckle.

'Just imagine, Jane. Why, we could have him make a model of—well, say, the Kremlin. Then, bingo!'

Mrs Bryce smiled doubtfully. 'What an idea,' she said in vague disapproval. Her face became wistful. 'He certainly does enjoy that modelling clay. It's so lucky you thought of it; nothing else seemed to absorb him.'

'We might have seen it long ago. You could tell from his drawings how much talent he had. And in clay, he's even better. That model of the chicken house was mighty good. Anybody could tell what it was. Maybe he'll be a famous artist some day. After all, Jane, my grandfather was——'

'I know, dear. But it's nearly half past. You'll be late, and you know how Ed hates that.'

Sighing, Bryce pushed away his cup. 'I'll just look in on Tommy before I go.' He went upstairs, humming cheerfully, and peered into the nursery. Yep, the kid was at it again, almost before he'd swallowed the last bite of breakfast.

'What's the masterpiece this time, Tompkins, sir?' he asked with mock deference. The grave-faced little boy struggled up on metal-braced legs, and shuffling clumsily across the room, raised his face for a kiss.

'It's the Wash-in-ton Mon-monu——'

'Washington Monument, hey?'

'Yes, Daddy. See, there's a big picture of it in this book. I'm almost done.'

'Then I suppose you'll be knocking it flat pretty soon, like you did Jeff Thorp's new chicken house.'

'I gotta smash it. There ain't enough clay to make anything else if I don't.'

'Aren't you ashamed, though? You know Thorp's chicken house fell apart just about the time you smashed your model.'

Tommy solemnly searched his father's features. Finally, he spotted the expected eye-twinkle, and an answering grin illuminated his pale face.

'You ain't mad, Daddy? Not really mad? You're glad, aintcha? Glad! You don't like ole Mr Thorp, an'——'

'That's nonsense,' his father broke in coldly. 'Why should I be glad over a neighbour's troubles? You mustn't say such things. Besides, it was only a coincidence.'

'A what?'

'It happened entirely by accident. Strange, all right, but what could you and your model—by George, it's late! Daddy will see you tonight.'

'Funniest thing happened to Jeff Thorp,' Bryce told his partner, Ed Givens. 'Just built a brand new chicken house. Proud as a peacock. Real scientific design and all. Last night a freak storm comes up and tears it apart. Fact! Couldn't have been flatter if an elephant sat on it. Old Jeff was fit to be tied.' He chuckled softly.

Ed yawned. 'Can't never tell about storms,' he said reminiscently. 'Remember once a twister broke up my barn in Kansas, and damned if it wasn't the only building hit for a mile or more around. But when she lit again, she pretty near wiped out the town of Clinton, three miles down the road.

'Then there was—say, what's that extry they're calling? Something 'bout Washington, sounds like Politics again. 'Nother scandal. Them bureaucrats——' He paused. They heard it plainly now, and stared at each other.

'The Washington Monument,' said Bryce in a small, tense voice. 'It collapsed.' He looked about wildly. 'Can you beat it, Ed—collapsed! I better go home. I—I'm not well today. Ed—you—I'll see you later.'

'Tommy!'

The boy looked up in surprise, and his eyes brightened in the small, sad face. 'It's Daddy! Home early!'

'Tell me, Tommy,' Bryce said huskily. 'Did you finish building the—the Washington Monument?'

'Sure, Daddy, and it looked just like the picture. Even Mom said so. But I can't show it to you. I hadda break it up to make—whassa matter? You and Mom look so funny. I'm scared. Don't look like that, D-Daddy.' A tear rolled down one cheek.

'Jane,' Bryce demanded tensely. 'When? When did he do it?'

'Fred, this is silly.' She twisted her hands together helplessly. 'Why, it's just—silly.'

'Answer me. When? When?'

'Why, I don't know exactly. Maybe Tommy remembers. You don't think for a single minute——'

'Son, tell Daddy. When did you break up your model?'

'Gee, Pop, it was right after lunch. I hadda make something else. It takes lots of clay. I'm almost through, an'—you ain't mad? I didn't know you wanted to see the old Mon-u-ment.'

'No, no. I'm not mad. It's nothing you did. Dear, when did you give him lunch?'

'About eleven thirty. But Fred, you're all upset. You ought to lie down——'

'About eleven thirty! Half an hour to eat makes it twelve—My God, that's it! Jane, that's when it happened! Twelve-six. An explosion, the paper said, but they don't really know.'

'Shh. Tommy's listening. You mustn't paw at your hair that way, dear. It's all on end.' She led her husband out. He stared blankly, but followed her downstairs.

'You remember what we were saying this morning?' he asked in a thin, taut voice.

'Yes, dear. Of course. But you must rest. And your hair, it's all——'

'Jane, don't be so damned—so bovine! Don't you see it? That's twice Tommy's models have made the real things—big things—smash when he—it can't be an accident again. It couldn't happen twice.'

'Certainly it's an accident,' said his wife soothingly. 'You're all upset. Nerves again. Just lie down here, and you'll be all right in a jiffy.'

He permitted himself to be bullied gently, and stretched out upon the divan, every nerve tingling. She drew the shades, leaving him there in the restful gloom.

Strange thoughts tumbled through his mind. Suppose it *is* true. Just suppose. No harm in that. Power. Inconceivable power. Destroy your enemy. Bring his house down about him. Destroy your country's enemies. Just a picture of the palace, state-building, or wherever the war-makers are meeting. Just that, and some clay.

Could be President, King, Emperor of the World, by George! Who could guess the source of his Godlike power—a crippled child modelling in gooey clay? Tommy himself needn't know. He'd build whatever Dad told him to. Good kid, Tommy. Hadn't been spoiled even though he couldn't get out and play.

Let's say Tommy modelled a man. He could do it. A man with scraggly whiskers and a harsh, predatory face like Thompson. J. Haverford Thompson, who owned the factory. Then, if Tommy's skilful, strong fingers closed firmly over the lean neck—talk about power! Dangerous power—say, what's he making now? It won't do not to check up. Why——

Bryce swung softly to his feet. He listened cautiously. From the kitchen gentle tinkles of utensils. Above, silence.

He tiptoed up, looked in. Tommy was working on a large ball of clay. Must be the whole ten pounds there. What were those marks he was making. Seams, that's it. A basketball. Poor little kid, how absorbed he is. No sports for him, so he models a basketball. It has been a lousy world for Tommy—a lousy world.

The boy yawned, pushed away an open book, and stretched his arms overhead with clenched fists.

Bryce took a second look at the ball—a long one. He stiffened.

Seams? No, by George! Mountain ranges! Rivers! That book—an Atlas.

Tommy's fists swung viciously down towards the model earth.

'No, Tommy! No!' screamed Bryce, leaping frantically across the room.

He was too late.

Words and Music

YEAH, IT'S A TALENT, all right,' Lane said gloomily. He emptied his fourth drink, and looked about in envious fascination. 'But it's not like fortune-telling. I can't make a living out of it. I've never even been inside a plush joint like this one before. No money in music nowadays; people don't learn instruments—they just listen to hi-fi from the can.'

'You couldn't get in here with a million.' Carson was complacent. 'This room's strictly for celebrities. Money or not, you gotta be known. Congressmen fly down from Washington; movie and TV stars drop by for drinks, and to be seen. The place is always crawling with V.I.P.s.'

The little man was wistful. 'Yeah, the classiest crowd I've ever seen. Even the music's special: "Pomp and Circumstance" from every other table.

'Fine, I see you're getting tuned up. Let's have that demonstration now, okay? I can't promise a thing, but I got friends here in New York. We might get you a good spot on TV. Eight, ten weeks on a high-priced quiz show could do a lot for your bank account.'

'It's all right with me,' Lane said, brightening a little. 'Where should I start?'

'Try that gal over there, huh?'

'You gotta remember,' Lane reminded him, 'it's not definite like words. Just atmosphere, mostly. The person's character and general background. An idea what's on their mind—even a peek into the future now and then.'

'That so?' Carson was impressed. 'Sounds like quite a deal to me.'

'Lemme explain first what it's like, so there won't be any misunderstandings. For instance, there was a guy I went to school with. His folks were set on making him a doctor. He was agreeable, but I didn't hear any medical music from him—nothing like it. Used to hear other kinds, especially one set of themes. I didn't know my stuff then, so it took me

quite a while to identify the music. Know what? It was that suite, "The Planets", by Holst.

Carson leaned forward, eyebrows raised. '"The Planets"? Greek to me; I'm a Welk fan myself. What's the point?'

Lane raised an admonitory finger and laid it along his big nose. 'That kid wound up at Mt Wilson, a first class astronomer. He found out something new about the planet Mercury. Forget what it was. If I'd known then what a talent I had, I could've predicted the whole thing.'

'Say,' Carson exclaimed in admiration, 'that's pretty neat! You hear a piece about planets—hear it inside your head, right?—and the guy turns out to be an astronomer.'

'Yeah, but I can't make a dime. All these years a music teacher, starving in three-four time,' he added sourly.

'We'll change that pretty damn quick. You got a talent there. Go ahead, see what you can do with the woman. But I give you fair warning—I know her.'

'This is on the level,' Lane said, blearily resentful.

'I'm only kidding.'

'Okay, then. Here goes.'

He stared at the woman. She twisted her creamy bare shoulders uneasily, and stopped smiling at her sleek companion.

'Well, what do you hear?' Carson demanded impatiently.

'Mendelssohn. Easy one: "Wedding March". Kinda jazzed up, though.'

'Ha! Anything else?'

'Clicking sounds, and a whir.'

'That's not music.' There was naked suspicion in Carson's voice.

'It's never all music. Plain sounds, too. Remember, noise and melody are just vibrations. It's just a matter of how they're organized.'

Carson reflected. 'Clicking and whirring. What the devil—say-y-y!'

'Right, ain't I?' Lane demanded, morosely triumphant. 'It always makes sense if you think it through.'

'It does at that. Damn good sense! If I didn't know for a fact that she just hit New York—you sure you haven't met her before?'

'I told you this was straight! I don't know the dame from your grandmother. It's a talent, that's all.'

'Don't get mad. It hasn't sunk in yet. See, that's Rita Howard, the movie star. Married seven times, some legal.'

'Mendelssohn,' Lane said with satisfaction. 'What about the whirr, clackety-clack?'

'Simple, if you know Rita. She's nuts about roulette. Practically haunts Vegas. Never has a dime. Say, try her some more; she oughta be good for a whole concert.'

With a shrug, the little man fixed his gaze again. He began to hum a scrap of melody. His voice was harsh but deadly accurate. 'Tough one,' he muttered. 'Not a war-horse like Mendelssohn. But it'll come. Dum de dum dah. Aha! Tricky. Roussel: "The Spider's Banquet".'

'That's a song? Helluva title, if you ask me.'

'Orchestral piece. Fits, doesn't it? Seven husbands, you said.'

'I get it—she's like a spider! Rita's sucked plenty of men dry, all right. And the latest victim's pouring drinks into her right now. Well, at least no spider has her curves! You're all right, Lane—a genius!'

'I got a talent. But it don't buy any groceries.'

'It will. That's a promise. Boy! This could be a big thing. Let's give it another whirl. Take that big, red-faced bird over there. What do you get from him?'

'Lemme listen . . . Sounds like a dog growling, that possible? Must be; it's coming through plain. A big dog. A mean one. Music, too. Another toughie. You sure pick 'em. Liszt? No, Berlioz. Not a major work. Overture, I think. Wait, it's coming. Dum dah dee-dah. Know it well. Got it! "Judges of the Secret Court". Sure, that's a composition; don't look so surprised. Welk don't play this one.'

Carson studied him in awe. 'Well, I'm damned. A bull's eye. That guy's Senator Crawford, a big shot on the Judiciary Committee. They call him a watch dog. You're batting a thousand.'

'He was easy,' Lane said, without conceit. He picked up the empty glass and set it down again. His host took the hint, beckoning to a waiter.

'Two more martinis, very dry.'

Lane was peering after the waiter. 'He's mad at us and the world,' the little man muttered. 'Hate music blasting out of him like a ninety-piece orchestra. "Vile Race of Courtiers" from *Rigoletto*.'

'Hell with him,' Carson grunted. 'See that fellow over there, the little plump one with buck teeth, grinning like a happy shark?'

'Yeah, I'll work him for you.' He gazed steadily at the man, who looked back at Lane, grinned wider, and nodded.

'Doesn't know you,' Carson sneered, 'but that S.O.B. would shine up to Judas if he thought it might pay off some time! Since you're here, he assumes you're somebody important. What're you getting?'

'A cinch, this one. It's played to death. "La Gazza Ladra".'

'What in hell's that? Why can't they have the English names?'

'"Gazza Ladra." Thieving magpie. Overture by Rossini.'

'Thieving mag—good boy!' Carson chuckled delightedly. 'Talk about a crook! Pearson had the Honourable J. Calvert Bangs tagged months ago. Oh, brother—and him howling smear and libel all over Washington!'

The little man sucked at his drink. He hiccoughed. 'Told you it works.'

'One more, huh?' Carson said. 'This is fun. Wednesday I'll get Jim Stein to meet us here. You got a great gimmick, man, and Stein's the one to do things with it.'

'The TV producer?'

'That's him. Movies, too. Look, get the guy leaving! The chunky character in the dark suit. There, he's stopped by the door.'

'Okay.' Lane peered vacantly at the tense, stony-faced man. 'Ha. Should know this one. I'm a little tight, and that slows me up. Rimsky-Korsakov . . . or Rachmaninov? Some Russian, that's for sure. Romantic School. Classical theme, too, weaving in and out. Whaddya know about that? Queer combination: classical and romantic. Mozart? No, Haydn. Can't get 'em. Noises, too. Whistles. I hear whistles.'

'Whistles?' Carson said. 'What kind of character is this? A wolf?'

'Not that kind. Shrill, *thin* whistles, like something moving high and fast. Real high up; sounds like fifty, sixty thousand feet . . . Music again. Can't place 'em when I'm tight. He's gone, anyway. Who was he?'

'Damned if I know—just thought he looked interesting. Some executive, I bet; one of those hard faces. See if you can place that music.'

'It'll come, but not now. After I sober up. Think of 'em easy tomorrow. Know the stuff well. Glazounov, maybe?'

'If you can't, you can't. I'll get a line on the man. Maybe by Wednesday you——'

'Sure, I never miss, only I'm tight. Spent twenty years studying music. Should have my own ensemble. Better—shoulda learned to be a butcher! Ever hear of a butcher going broke?'

'You made your point. Well, be here Wednesday at three. Stein and I might come up with a proposition.' They left.

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On Wednesday they shared a table with Stein.

Stein was a small, almost dwarfish man, redeemed from ugliness only

by eyes which were liquid brown and compassionate. He drank milk. 'My stomach's giving me hell,' he moaned.

'Too bad,' Lane said politely, watching him with furtive awe. Stein's income was reputed to exceed half a million yearly.

'Isn't it? Took me thirty years to afford decent food, and now I can't eat it.' He gulped morosely. 'It's the strain. First World War II; then Korea; next Suez. Never any let-up. A man worries about his grandchildren. And no policy you can count on. We fight in Europe—we defend the U.S. only. Arm—stop arming. Make bigger bombs—junk 'em all. The whole world's crazy! Now Russia's screaming at England and France again. Kick out the American missile bases, or we might have to attack. They say thirty or forty Russian rockets could destroy England and we'd have a rough time hitting back from here.' He glared at his glass. 'And for a little splash milk, two dollars, the robbers!'

'Don't cry, Jimmy. You can afford it,' Carson grinned. 'And quit worrying. Not even the Commies would wipe out France and kill Brigitte Bardot!' He winked at Lane. 'Well, I identified our mystery man from the other day. If you spotted the music, let's see how close they fit.'

'You bet I got the music! And I was close, too, tight or not. Funny thing, both pieces were about islands. Ain't that something?'

'Islands? I don't see that. You must be off base this time, Lane.'

'Like hell! I never miss. Rachmaninov: "The Isle of the Dead". That's the Russian one. Remember, I mentioned Rachmaninov. Not so easy, but I'm sure now. The classic was no push-over, either. Haydn: "The Uninhabited Island". Gloomy, almost threatening readings. But those whistles high up don't mean a thing to me.'

Carson's face was suddenly grey and flaccid. 'No,' he said half to himself. 'They can't be that crazy. It's just more bluff!'

Stein looked at him in momentary wonder, and Lane thrust out his chin.

'Ain't I right?' he demanded belligerently. '"Isle of the Dead". "The Uninhabited Island". And forty whistling things high up. It's gotta fit in somewhere. I'm never wrong on this stuff. Who was the guy, anyhow?'

'The Russian Ambassador to England,' Carson said. 'The one they just recalled.' They looked at each other in horror while Stein, hardly listening, his thoughts on the worrisome headlines, quietly sipped his milk.

The Radio

I'VE THOUGHT IT OVER, and decided to tell you the truth. Certainly I refused to give the police a statement. What could I tell them—the truth, too? They'd think I was crazy. And what would be the point in a false explanation? It was a case of the truth or nothing, so I kept still.

But you—you're my lawyer, and a man of education. Imagination, too, I hope, or this will be a complete waste of time. It's not the verdict, you understand; that doesn't worry me. A drowning man doesn't fuss over the fact that salt water stings his eyes. I've lost too much to care about prison.

All right; I know you're a busy man; I'll get to the point.

I was listening to the World Series. She—my wife—was in town, shopping. You remember the Series. It was three and three. Seemed important then. Now—but skip it.

It was the third inning of that seventh game. The Dodgers had one man on second, two out; and the count on Snider was three balls. Neither team had scored yet. A good game. And then the damn TV conked out. The screen just went black. The only thing I know how to fix is the fuse, and that wasn't the trouble. I tinkered a little; opened the back; tightened the tubes—nothing. I was plenty teed off. The set was almost new; had cost a bundle; and it had to pick a time like this to quit. Funny how serious little things can seem until you know better. A person doesn't know what real trouble is, yet he carries on as if the world was ending. So I couldn't watch the game—was that so damned important?

Anyway, there I was, stuck without a set, with no chance of getting it repaired in time. And you know my place, well out of town, on the El Toro Road. Twenty miles from nowhere. No neighbours I could watch with. I wanted to boot that lousy TV.

Then I remembered there was still such a thing as radio. Funny

thing, though, I didn't know for sure if we even had one in the house. We hadn't listened for years. Still, it was a chance, so I searched the place. I found a portable in the spare bedroom, but it was kaput, like the TV. Probably hadn't been used for ages.

I was about to give up, when I suddenly remembered my Dad's old set—up in the attic. Nobody'd given it a thought since he died in 1935. There was just a chance it might still work; they built 'em to last in those days.

I hurried up to the attic, and sure enough, there it was, dusty and rickety—an old Atwater-Kent, remember them?

Well, I lugged it down. It had one wobbly leg, weighed a ton, and looked a hundred years old; but when I plugged the thing in, it actually worked. It had a weak, far-away sound when you tuned in, but perfectly clear. After thirty years, it played.

But when I got the old set tuned in on the game, I was mighty puzzled. It hadn't taken more than twenty minutes to find the radio, yet instead of being in, at most the fourth inning, they were in the last of the fifth.

It didn't seem reasonable, not in a World Series, where everybody takes his time, and is careful as hell. I wanted to know what I'd missed anyhow, and as usual in that case, the announcer talked about everything else, including the heights and weights of the players' grandmothers. So I phoned Jerry Martin. It didn't take him long to straighten me out. Said I was nuts. Certainly it was only the last of the fourth.

It's the truth; I can't help it. That's the way it was. That old set was exactly one hour ahead of the rest of the world! Don't look at me like that. I know it sounds crazy. But I can only tell you what happened. I'll take a lie detector test any time you say.

I didn't believe it myself, at first. But it was an easy thing to verify. I just took the radio schedules from the paper, and tuned in a dozen or so programmes. Each one came on about an hour ahead of the usual time.

Well, I spent the rest of that afternoon in a daze. I knew an hour before Jerry that my bet was safe—that Los Angeles had won. I had crazy, wild dreams of money to be made on races, stocks, politics—even had ideas of doing a TV broadcast involving predictions: the old Drew Pearson gimmick, but with one hundred per cent accuracy.

I didn't even wonder how Dad had done it. If he hadn't died so suddenly from that heart attack, I suppose he'd have told us plenty. As it was, the set rotted in our attic for thirty years. Now I'd be damned if anybody else would ever get it from me. Maybe the scientists could

improve it; get farther into the future, and all, but my exclusive would be gone. No, I was better off with my one hour for myself.

Time began to drag about four, because I was anxious for Stephanie—my wife—to get back, so I could tell her the incredible, wonderful news. We share—shared—everything.

At five she was still out, and I was listening, in a dreamy sort of way. It was one of those nauseating programmes where they set up a mike and buttonhole people going by. This was in front of a drugstore in town, one of those Hollywood places where stars are supposed to pop in. They were questioning some giggly dame they'd stopped, when all of a sudden there was a flock of excitement. A car had swerved up on the sidewalk, and hit a woman.

Naturally, they couldn't or wouldn't identify the victim on the air—some FCC rule, I suppose. But they bore down on the incidentals: how the driver looked like a maniac or drug-fiend; that the woman had been knocked out of her shoes, and lay there in her stocking feet. Her purse had been tossed near the mike, and the announcer couldn't resist describing that—a green plastic bag with a chrome monogram, SDR. When he said that, I was sick. There couldn't be two such purses, and I knew immediately that the woman was Stephanie.

Sure, I know you don't get it. Sounds completely impossible; but this is exactly the way it happened, I tell you.

I sat there stunned, nearly out of my mind. I love—loved—my wife, and now she—but I didn't know, for sure, then. There still seemed to be hope—time. You see, I remembered that my radio was still an hour fast. The accident hadn't actually happened yet!

Don't you see? There was a chance—a good one. If only I could get there in time. Head Stephanie off a block down, or stop the car that was going to hit her.

When the idea struck home, I jumped up. That's when I bumped the radio. The weak leg broke, and the whole thing crashed. If the set was only still working, you'd know I wasn't lying.

But I had no time to bother about it then. I ran to my car, started up, and drove for town like mad. Usually it's a forty minute run on the freeway, but this was the rush hour. You know what it's like: bumper to bumper at twenty miles an hour. Could I ask a cop to rush me through? Tell him I was trying to prevent an accident fifteen minutes before it was supposed to happen?

So it was damn near six ten before I got near that drugstore. Even

then, I wasn't too clear about what to do. I hoped to catch Stephanie some distance off, and get her out of there.

My time was about gone, and I was in bad shape emotionally; sweat in my eyes; full of the shakes. I spotted an opening in the traffic, and stepped on the gas, heading for a parking space near the store. Then everything went wrong. That fool kid ran out into the street after his damned balloon, with his mother squawking behind him like an old hen.

What could I do? It's instinctive for a driver to avoid hitting somebody. I turned aside hard, and before I could stop, was over the kerb, into the crowd, with something soft under my wheels.

I climbed out, scared and dizzy, but accident or not, worried about my wife first. The pop-eyed man by the mike was holding a green purse and shouting. Then I saw—in front of my car—and her shoes—you know the rest.

Two Lunchdates with Destiny

AS HE LEFT THE DRAB, noisy office, Paul Greenwood was still undecided about where to have lunch. The matter was disproportionately important to him, since the noon break in his tedious routine was the one delectable mountain rising from the dreary flatland of his workday.

He was a short man whose narrow shoulders, spindly neck, wide butt, and sallow skin with many liver spots made him resemble a giant, overripe pear. He walked slowly, with the shuffling, toes-out gait of the sedentary; there was no spring in his step, and rarely any spring in his heart. He had little hair, less ambition, an atrophied ego, and, he was certain, no future in his job of senior clerk. After forty-three undistinguished years in the world, dead stop, wheels not even spinning.

But it was a fine day, he felt, looking about him appreciatively. The sun was strong but not oppressive, in perfect tune with April. For now, the cruel month seemed almost kind. Even the air had an invigorating chill with a vinous tang very congenial to his nose.

As he came to the busy corner of Forest and Lighthouse streets, the question of lunch was still unanswered. Clam chowder, a cheeseburger, and maybe chocolate cream pie at Flo's Café, or a big bowl of tongue-searing chili at El Matador? He licked his lips, feeling a surge of hunger. Ever a greedy eater, he had always found that food was truly more than a necessity; it was a vital part of what little pleasure he got from life.

As in so many of our daily affairs, the matter was decided by a seemingly trivial event: the traffic signal had just turned red, and rather than waiting for a change back to green, Greenwood simply went with the flow, turned right, and headed for Flo's. He was actually relieved to have the choice made for him, being somewhat in the position of Buridan's Ass in the fable, unable to choose between two bundles of hay equidistant from it. (Actually, modern exegetes insist, it was a dog, and

the food meat.) Paul, however, was not very decisive but was not about to starve to death like the French schoolman's irresolute beast.

He had just come to the bank in the middle of the block when there were screams from inside followed by the sound of gunfire, and two men ran out. Both were armed with automatics, and one bore a large paper bag, obviously full of cash. Paul was directly in their path, and the bigger felon reacted quickly. He rammed the muzzle of his gun into Greenwood's ribs and said, 'Move, you! Into the car!'

Only a pair of bumbling losers, far out of their criminal depth, would have picked so conspicuous a getaway car—it was a vintage Daimler—but they had been impressed by its appearance, very suggestive of great speed and power. And it had been easy to steal, parked on a quiet street. The timing was perfect, too; no report of the theft could be circulated before the robbery was under way, if then.

Paul had never been a marvel of mental agility, and now he hardly realized what was happening so fast and without any warning. Only when shoved violently into the back seat of the huge black vehicle did he begin to understand in a confused way that he was hostage to a couple of dangerous criminals. The wailing siren of a police cruiser, which had been at the far end of his consciousness, suddenly became very loud, and the man at the Daimler's wheel looked back at it, his stubbled face pale and damp.

'Y-you won't kill me,' Paul pleaded through dry lips. 'You'll let me go, won't you?'

'Shut up,' said the man next to him in the back seat, almost absently, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

'He knows us,' the driver said tensely.

'So does half the damn bank, stupid! First you let your mask slip, then you hadda take that shot at the guard.'

'He was makin' a move, wasn't he?'

'Hell, the old guy was just nervous.' He looked back at the police car, which had been joined by several others. 'See, they ain't shootin'; it's just like I told ya—they'll never fire with him here.'

'So they ain't shootin' yet,' was the sour rejoinder. 'How do we shake them—and when? Jeez, half the county must be after us by now.'

'We'll get our chance; I'll think of something. Just drive—not so damn fast; you could kill us first!—and play it cool.'

They did, indeed, get past the initial roadblock. The police tried a bluff, but when they saw the gun pressed against Greenwood's head, they reluctantly pulled back, leaving the street clear.

At the next one, though, things were better organized. There were a lot more cops, and one with a bullhorn who boomed, 'You can't get away. Release your hostage, drop those weapons, and come out—slowly—with your hands on your heads.' The distorted words, buzzing with overtones, echoed from the embankment.

'Maybe we'd better quit,' the man in front said, a distinct quaver in his voice.

'You're still a gutless wonder,' his partner said. 'We've got over ninety thousand here, maybe more. Damned if I'll give it up now and spend twenty years in stir. No way! They gotta be bluffin'—don't you watch TV? They got strict orders never to shoot when there's a hostage in danger.' He jabbed Paul again with the gun. 'We're safe with him, so we can wait for a break.'

He was tragically wrong in this case. Up on the embankment was a sharpshooter with a high-powered rifle, and finding one of the felons in his telescopic sight, he opted, as his orders allowed, for a clean shot well clear of Greenwood. His error was essentially one of human physiology: when the .30 calibre slug shattered the spine of the man next to Paul, his whole body convulsed from the shock, his finger closed on the trigger, and Greenwood heard a tremendous boom, but felt nothing. He merely saw a scarlet mist that instantly darkened and enveloped him. Then he fell headlong into a final night.

Paul Greenwood's first lunch with Destiny was over.

When he came to the corner of Forest and Lighthouse, Paul Greenwood was still mentally debating the question, cheeseburger or chili? But the signal had just turned green, so he crossed the street instead of turning right towards Flo's and headed for El Matador, unaware that a bank robbery was in progress only two blocks away.

Entering the little restaurant with its ostentatiously Spanish ambience, he was pleased to get his favourite counter stool near the big picture window. He liked to watch the people passing while he ate, although as a devout trencherman, the food was the paramount joy to him. There were few men going by he didn't envy. Certainly he resented the muscular young ones with their confident, vigorous strides, but he also peered wistfully at those his own age, debonair, distinguished, and wearing well-cut, expensive clothes. Paul's suit was old and baggy, with a seat worn thin that shone—a deskworker's bottom, he ruefully thought sometimes.

Most of all he envied those men accompanied by lovely young women with long hair, tanned, clear skins, and a fluid grace of movement. He was himself a lifelong bachelor, invisible to even the most desperate spinsters. Yet the sun was still bright, his appetite keen, and the chili just as he preferred it—hot enough to melt asphalt. He ate hungrily, savouring each blistering mouthful.

Inside the bank, a woman customer screamed, unable to stand the growing tension. Startled, one of the robbers saw the elderly guard seem to reach for the gun in his holster, and hastily fired. The old man fell, spouting blood, and the whole scene went out of control. A police cruiser loafing along two blocks away screeched to a stop, turned, and raced towards the sound of the shot.

The two robbers ran from the bank, empty-handed. They heard the siren, their nerves tightened further, and they dashed to their getaway car. It was an old Daimler, and its mighty, upslanted hood gave it a look of aggressive brute ferocity nothing made today could match. As they left the kerb, tyres squealing, the police car barrelled around the corner, closing in.

The fugitives' lead was clearly inadequate, and the cruiser quickly overtook them. In a matter of seconds the cop in front with the driver took advantage of the close range and clear field of fire. He should not have pulled the trigger; it was a violation of department policy to endanger the public in such circumstances; he was just supposed to follow and arrange roadblocks.

But the officer's father had been crippled for life during a bank robbery in which his partner had been killed, and the son hated that class of criminals with an almost blind ferocity. He leaned out the window, gun in both hands, lined it up, and shot twice. It was a non-regulation pistol, a .44 Magnum, powerful enough to stagger a Cape buffalo. And he lived up to his reputation as the department's best marksman. Both of the big slugs slammed into the Daimler's driver. The car swerved wildly, mounted the kerb, scattering people in all directions, and crashed through the huge front window of El Matador, a juggernaut of metal almost tank-like in its awesome mass and energy.

Paul Greenwood, having just finished the chili, was cooling his smarting mouth with water and thinking about a hot fudge sundae—dare he risk more sodium and saturated fat with such blood pressure?—when he saw the immense hood, sprinkled with broken glass, bearing directly down on him and seeming to take forever. But no human, even of Olympian agility, could possibly have evaded that black prow. This

was no mere glancing blow, but the full impact of tons of mainly unyielding metal. A scream welled up from Greenwood's throat, ballooning enormously, compounded of fear and despair, but it never passed his lips. He was hurtled into his final night.

Paul Greenwood's second lunch with Destiny was over.

At the corner of Forest and Lighthouse the signal was still obeying its built-in, iron law of cycling, mindlessly ordering the flow of cars and people. Green, yellow, red—green, yellow, red——

But Destiny is colour-blind.

3rd Sister

I remember being eight when it happened . . .

Judging from old photographs, I was an extremely attractive child, with perfect features and enormous dark eyes that sparkled with animation. That is hardly surprising, when you consider my parents. They were both actors, the descendants of distinguished theatrical families going back several generations, all members of which were notable for looks and talent. After a hundred years, there must be a kind of evolutionary selection among such lines, since leading men and women of the stage, given a modicum of ability, prosper according to their profiles.

My father died when I was six, and mother didn't marry again, although there was a succession of men known to me as 'uncles', who shared our life together for a time. They said I took after her, at least in appearance. She was reputed to be one of the most beautiful and witty women of her generation, a Mrs Pat Campbell–Jane Cowl sort of amalgam.

Not that we spent much time together in those early days. To be sure, she often took me away on her tours; but what with rehearsals, and plays that ran until eleven at night, or even later, we didn't have many hours alone. Yet I loved her passionately: her smile; her warm, lilting voice; the delicate scent she wore; the way she mischievously tugged my hair, or kissed my nose. Beautiful, feminine, fascinating mother. To think she was only thirty when it happened.

I was eight, but like most children of professional people, unusually mature in many ways. We were at home for a change. Home to mother was the small town in Illinois where her parents' house still stood. She came there perhaps once a year for a few weeks, to rest or study a new, more exacting role. This time an 'Uncle Carey' was with us in the old, ramshackle building. I remember him as a tall, ironic sophisticate, who tried to amuse me with dry humour that I couldn't possibly understand

until years later. But he was an improvement over 'Uncle Calvin', a dark, moody type, who ignored me completely.

I think that mother was studying the part of Candida, in Shaw's play—a role to enchant any discerning actress. She and Uncle Carey were reading together; I enjoyed their dulcet tones without following much of the dialogue. Just as my bedtime came along, mother's voice faltered suddenly; her face became oddly pale; and in a matter of moments, it seemed, there was panic in the old house, as she collapsed. There had been some illness in the little town; probably typhoid, a terrible scourge in those days. Before we knew it, this gay, lovely creature, apparently in the best of health, was fighting for survival.

The over-worked doctor came, and did what he could. With no antibiotics, it was a matter of anti-toxin and good nursing. Uncle Carey found a competent woman, one of the brisk, no nonsense type, who promptly took over the household. But the serum was not sufficiently potent, mother refused to mend, and wavered precariously between life and death.

I went about in a daze. Too young to really believe in death, I had some instinctive knowledge that my mother could somehow be taken from me forever, an intolerable vision. I must have prayed very hard. The others—Uncle Carey, and the servants—were too busy to bother with a child, so I wandered about, pale and distraught, and was usually ordered to go out and play.

The disease finally reached its crisis, and everybody knew that by the next morning mother would be either mending or dead. They were too involved with her to notice my own flushed face, or the over-brightness of my eyes. Late in the afternoon I slipped from the house, and headed down the dusty street. Always a sensitive child, my own illness, with the attendant high fever, had somehow put me in tune with occult forces, and I sought, unknowingly, a source of evil. At least, that was how I judged it at the age of eight, that stifling summer in Illinois, when mother lay dying.

I walked along, between those wonderful old elms, towards the edge of town, coming unerringly to an ancient, sun-dried house, its yard overgrown with weeds and great glowing sunflowers. A few doors away, I met a chubby, tow-headed boy of my own age, whom I knew slightly. In a sing-song voice, half delirious, I asked him who lived there.

'Just some ole ladies,' he replied contemptuously. 'Better stay away; they're crazy, Maw says.'

I felt that his mother was wise, for the house seemed a focus of evil.

Ignoring the boy, I went up on the sagging porch, and peered through a dusty window. There were three women inside, sharing an old-fashioned parlour. They were elderly, but I knew it more by intuition than from their looks, for the three faces, plainly showing some blood relationship among the women, were unlined, even beautiful in a stern, classical way.

Two of them were working with some queer weaving mechanism. Their product was exquisite: a strange, shimmering cloth with a treble-shot, fantastic texture. As the first woman selected certain coloured yarn, passing it to the second, the latter wove it dexterously into a pattern, which she apparently improvised with great artistic ingenuity. The third, who merely watched, held a large, golden pair of scissors.

Even as I gazed in wonder at the disturbing scene, this woman spoke.

'It is time to cut the thread,' she said, her voice like a silver bell, lacking all human overtones.

The other two paused.

'The pattern is not complete; there are many more fine designs to come,' said the woman who was choosing the yarn.

'Yes, I have plans for them,' the weaver added.

'It is time to cut the thread,' the first speaker insisted. 'I know, my sisters. I always know.'

I knew, too. By some means, never to become clear to me, I was certain that the pattern, so fine and glittering, was my mother's; and that her thread of life was to be severed. Ordinarily a timid child, I found in my delirium courage far beyond my normal capacity. I sprang to the door, wrenched it open, and faced the awesome trio.

They were surprised. Whoever or whatever they were, my sudden descent upon them was something unexpected. They had enormous, overwhelming presence, but under it I sensed their amazement. An alien had invaded their world. They fixed wide-set grey eyes on me in silence for a moment, then the one choosing the threads said quietly: 'How did this child get here?'

The weaver replied: 'I do not know, sister. It should not have happened.'

The one with the golden shears—she whom I feared and hated—said: 'Love and innocence can tear the veil. She loves her mother.'

'I love her!' I sobbed. 'You must not cut the thread! I won't let you.'

Their severe, classic features were devoid of pity. Passionless, unmoved, terrible, they sat there. Only the golden scissors in the third

woman's exquisite, long fingers opened and closed like the jaws of a wild beast.

Finally the one who held it said: 'The thread must be cut. I know. I always know the right time.'

I stepped towards her, my tiny fists clenched.

'No! I won't let you. You nasty old woman. I'll tell Sheriff Bill. He'll lock you up in his jail.' I was threatening these immortals with an old, ineffectual sot. I could weep now at the irony of it.

'We have delayed long enough,' the weaver said. 'If you must cut, Atropos, do it now.'

The long thread, glowing in the light of the setting sun that streamed through the window, was extended, and the shears moved forward.

'No!' I screamed. 'No!' And I stood directly between them, my breast almost touching the sharp, open points.

'Cut!' the thread-chooser cried.

'Cut now, sister!' the weaver echoed. 'Quickly, or we will be too late.'

The chill grey eyes of the woman called Atropos found my own, feverish and glowing with fanatic determination.

'Stand aside, child. You don't know what you are doing.'

'You can't have my mother. I love her. I don't want to live without her!'

'Cut the thread!'

'Cut immediately; the sand runs out; the moment passes. Cut, cut!'

'I cannot,' Atropos said. 'She is too strong. The power of love and innocence prevails. Her illness has given her strength to pass the forbidden veil. Sisters, I cannot sever the golden thread.'

'Too late,' said the one choosing yarn, as she reached for fresh strands.

'Too late,' the weaver agreed. 'I must find a new pattern, and go on after all.'

'Foolish child,' Atropos said in her level, brightly metallic voice. 'What have you done?'

'You won't cut it? You won't cut my mother's thread?'

'I cannot; the time has passed. There will come another proper moment, but who can say when, now? I might pity you, if I could. Leave us, child, the damage is done.'

I stumbled out of that room, into the hot, sultry street, past the wide-eyed boy, who shrank away from me. Somehow I got home, where my incoherent story was ascribed to delirium—an explanation

that cannot be disproved. I spent ten days in bed, but when I recovered, my mother, laughing and beautiful once more, was there beside me.

She is still there, right across the room. A blind, drooling woman of ninety-eight. There is nothing left of the wit and beauty that entranced two continents. It all vanished nearly fifty years ago. And I—I am a barren spinster of seventy-nine, still fastened, as I have been for so long, to that dying animal across the room. I have spent my life caring for her who should have died young, lovely, and adored, as the Third Sister would have ordained. Fool that I was to meddle! Atropos, of the golden shears, wherever you are, pity me, and cut two threads today.

The Tidings

In through my window flew this archangel.

That's as good a place to hook it as any, short of starting at the beginning—and I mean the Beginning. I was mixed up with this business from the first, and my published reports didn't tell the whole story by any means. Now that everybody's taking it all so seriously, a few marginal notes might help.

It's not very surprising, when you consider the situation—the desire for publicity—that one of the angels called on me among the first. After all, my column does reach at least as many readers as Winchell's, and on a more literate level. I can't actually prove that the other dozen or so Divine Messengers didn't get to their men earlier, but my paper hit the stands ahead of its rivals. Besides, mine was an archangel, remember. A fine, personable chap, even if rather naïve. I'll call it 'him', although there's no way of telling. Put it down to a male superiority complex.

I know what you're thinking: that this is one hell of a time to get flippant. Maybe so, but it's the only way I can write, and furthermore, I've never taken mankind or its ultimate fate very much to heart. Frankly, I prefer Siamese cats. Do me something.

It was a hot evening, that red letter one when all the fuss began. My window was wide open; I was having a last pipe before reworking a stubborn column. A column I never did use, come to think of it. Anyway, in through my window flew this archangel.

'Leonard J. Irwin,' he cried in a ringing, melodious voice. 'I bring a message.'

Newspaper men can't ever admit to being surprised by anything that happens; and right here, in print, I'll deny getting excited. I looked him over very calmly. Handsome; smooth, boyish face; golden hair, quite curly; Grecian type robes; and, of course, wings. Utterly, hopelessly non-aerodynamic, those wings. You'll never convince me that angels actually fly with them. It's just teleportation, or something.

'Leonard J. Irwin,' he repeated (we never got to the first-name stage—*he* wouldn't even drop the initial); 'the One who sent me is wroth with humanity.' This angel threw in an archaic Biblical phrase here and there, but his English was otherwise like anybody else's.

I managed to answer without too much embarrassment. And give me credit for not gasping out, 'Who are you?' Any damn fool could see. When a character with wings and sandals flits through a window ten storeys up, it's obvious he didn't come from Gimbel's.

'I'm a little wroth myself,' I replied, showing great self-possession. 'And so are a lot of other people. We've been hoping, in fact, that Somebody would take a hand and put things in order before it's too late. Welcome and thrice welcome.'

'So,' he said, looking at me fixedly, 'there is some concern.'

'Concern!' I exploded. 'Hell, yes!' He winced, and I knew he didn't come from There. 'Do you think we like what's going on in Russia, or China, or——'

'Or anywhere else,' he cut in very coldly.

'Touché,' I admitted. 'There's a bit of skulduggery here and there in the U.S., too. Who am I to deny it? But what's the remedy? I may be a pessimist, but to me man is a disgusting animal. Personally, without being reactionary, I think another flood—warm water, if you don't mind——'

'Peace! The Prime Intelligence cannot repeat.'

'Then it's pretty hopeless. You need something with teeth in it. There are too many places on earth where physical pain is a weapon of state as well as a personal, psychopathic pick-me-up for assorted bully-boys. How are you going to teach these jolly folks the Brotherhood of Man?'

'We have the means, and they will not fail. Hark!'

I cringed at that *Hark*. It always suggests third-rate verse. 'Yes?' I prompted him.

'My Master has decreed the following new law for humanity. Hear it, remember it, make it known to all the world. *Whosoever inflicts wanton pain upon another shall, at the same time, and in the same degree, feel such pain himself.*' I could almost hear his unspoken epilogue: 'How's that for a neat ordinance?'

'Well,' I began doubtfully, 'it seems pretty cute, but——'

'But what?' The archangel sounded a little piqued by my lack of enthusiasm for his ingenious ukase. You see, he hadn't lived through the

Volstead Era, and probably was ignorant of the peculiar mores of motorists.

'I don't think it'll work, that's all.'

'And why not?' He seemed indignant. 'It's flawless. If one man hurts another for no reason, he'll feel the same pain himself. By this token, nobody will be in a hurry to maltreat the next fellow. Yet the word "wanton" leaves room for the duties of surgeons and other justifiable pain-givers. In a matter of weeks, man will learn to respect the sanctity of the individual, and do that which is right. Besides, a whole council of elder angels approved the law's soundness. Amen, I say unto thee, there are no loopholes.'

'Maybe they did, but you angels—excuse my candour—are an ivory tower bunch, I'm afraid. Now, I don't know just how people—some people—will get around your neat commandment, but believe me, when it comes to evading laws in order to do himself dirt, man is the all-time, copper-riveted, no-holds-barred champion of the universe. It takes a newspaper hack, not an angel, to realize that.' I was feeling unusually bitter, having just had dealings with a used car dealer known far and wide as Saintly Sam.

'Unhappy man!' the angel reproved me. 'O thou of little faith!' Then, with a more businesslike ring: 'Enforceable or not, see that the law gets known immediately.'

When he took that tone, I didn't mess around. 'Yessir,' I said. 'Right away.'

'Then my job's done. Woe to the multitude if they transgress! So long.' And gathering his robe close, he dived head-first out of my window. My stomach turned over, but when there was no clatter in the florist's stall, ten storeys down, I guessed he'd made a flying speed okay.

Well, at first, as you all know, things looked good. Reports began to pile in. The small town sheriff who tried to pistol-whip a bum, and yelped in agony at the first blow. And the rapist who suddenly felt all the shock and terror of his prospective victim. They both fled screaming in opposite directions, she unharmed, he unlikely to try again, and certain to fail in any case. And yet it wasn't long before other stories, unpleasant one, hit the big dailies.

Sure enough, the archangel came back. My window was closed, but when he fluttered around the glass like an outsize moth, I let him in. He seemed glad to alight on something solid again. It must be quite a long

trip from There to here, and not especially congenial. No doubt our ambassador to Moscow would understand the angel's attitude.

I didn't say anything. Why rub it in? And after a minute he remarked dolefully, 'Man is certainly tricky. Rebellion and sedition against the Law flourish like the green bay tree.'

'Which particular ingenuity are you thinking of?' I asked him, although I had a pretty good idea.

'That trick in totalitarian countries—and a few others—of using masochists to inflict the lighter punishments. And the much more nasty device of lining up fifty or a hundred fanatic party men, and having each person give the victim one lash, or one burn, or one similar agony, thus dividing the poor fellow's torment among many executioners.' He shook his golden head. 'Diabolical!'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I doubt if my Managing Editor could top that stunt, and I'm sure he works for the D—— the other side.'

'I'm glad you have the decency not to mention that name in my presence,' he said frostily. 'But if you're implying man isn't to blame——'

'Not at all, but don't say I didn't warn you.' I spoke with a touch of complacency. To be honest, I was perversely proud of man's genius for law evasion. Still, I thought there was something to be said in our behalf. 'It's only a few. Most people are quite innocent——'

'There are no innocent humans,' he replied flatly. 'Only a small number less guilty. Anyhow, it won't happen again.'

'Ah,' I said. 'You've accepted my advice about the flood. Good. I suggest——'

'No. The law has been amended. There will be no evasion, now.' Once again he stood erect, putting on his hanging face. 'Hark! O Leonard J. Irwin: *Whosoever inflicts wanton pain upon another shall, at the same time, feel the same variety of pain, but multiplied a thousandfold.* You will note,' he added somewhat smugly, 'that even a single whiplash would be unendurable for the smiter. No more division of pain.'

'Your laws are too literal and specialized,' I protested. 'And that's the trouble. If you'd merely make everybody incapable of evil——'

'Please don't try to teach us our business,' he snubbed me. 'Man must have free will to work out his own salvation if such an end is to come to pass.'

'Any more laws,' I told him, 'and man will be about as free as the folks in Stalingrad on May Day. Why not do it right?' He ignored me, so I said: 'You'll be back.'

He gave me a solemn shake of the head, then jumped, feet first this

time. When I peeked out, he was heading straight up in the general direction of Antares.

But, of course, he was back in six weeks. It was inevitable. And he had bags under his eyes.

'Now what?' I asked him, since the rumours from certain countries were rather confusing. One said that physiologists had found a way of stimulating particular nerves so that when the victim felt an unbearable twinge, the same stimulation multiplied a thousand times became merely a pleasant tonic to the torturer.

The archangel, very downcast, admitted this was so, and worse, some people had found another loophole in the new law: the use of animals—wild ones, that is, in ironic distinction from the animal, man.

'Hearken unto me,' he complained. 'They send the teeth of beasts upon them, or the stings of angry bees. The creatures inflict pain, but not wantonly. Few lower animals are capable of wantonness. As we conceived the law, wild beasts and insects do not feel the pain they cause; and even if they did, nothing would change. A lion in agony would attack all the harder, mad with torment.'

'But surely,' I objected, 'the person who turned the animals against his fellows is the guilty party.'

'Verily, O Leonard J. Irwin,' the angel admitted with some confusion, 'but we never dreamed of such perverted inventiveness. If one man lures another into a chamber full of savage beasts, all he'll feel is whatever apprehension the victim suffers *before* the brutes take over. A clever villain can contrive to lead his enemy to doom without arousing any fear until it's too late. I wonder,' he added bitterly, 'who thought of using wild animals?'

'I don't know, but one'll get you ten that plenty of brilliant characters came up with the idea simultaneously. We have no lack of imaginative thinkers. This planet is lousy with such talent.'

'So I see. But there won't be any more loopholes in the law. It's been carefully revi——'

'Wanna bet?'

He gave me one look from his amber, cold-lit eyes, and I felt as if I'd been caught scribbling a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

'This is the new law,' he intoned, not even standing up. Apparently he was tired of making a big show of the legislation and then having the rug pulled out from under his very humanitarian statutes. '*Whenever wanton pain, or even discomfort, is inflicted by any human, using any agency*

whatever, upon another human, every person in the whole world not already undergoing maltreatment shall feel such pain or discomfort in the same degree.'

He looked at me triumphantly, and I thought it over. No more use of animals. The one employing them would feel pain. Good. Frankly, I was almost ready to admit that this might be It. He saw my hesitation, and his dour expression brightened.

'They can't get around that,' he exulted. 'Garments will wax old upon you ere——'

'I won't give you ten-to-one odds,' I told him, 'but if you're interested in even money——'

'Don't be idiotic,' he retorted. 'This is no game.' He stepped to the window sill. 'I doubt if I'll be back. This law is sound and finds favour in our sight, so——'

'I'll make it three to one,' I said hastily, my confidence in mankind returning. But he was gone, making a whoosh like a jet plane. I think he hurried to avoid temptation. There's something about gambling that not even an angel can resist.

Well, I'm almost up to date, now. He was back last night. I'd never seen his face so coldly aloof, so stern, so essentially withdrawn.

'Okay, tell Poppa—how did they scuttle you this time?'

There was a blending of respect and loathing in his tones. 'They torture people in pairs,' he said. 'They put one man naked in a refrigeration room at ten below zero Fahrenheit, and another in a steam-heated cell at 130 degrees. Both men suffer terribly, but every other human being feels a combination of minus ten and plus 130 degrees, which is the same, obviously'—here he glanced at the scribblings on one broad wing-feather—'as a not uncomfortable 60 degrees.'

'So,' I said, a bit sarcastically, 'you're back with The Solution. Well, I'm all ears. This one ought to sew us up tight.'

'No,' he replied, his voice like a deep-tolling bell. 'I have an altogether different message—a final one. Man is now on his own for good. My Superior is herewith abdicating all responsibility for whatever happens on earth in the future. Howl, O gate; cry, O city!'

He made it sound pretty awful, and for a moment I felt chilled. 'I guess He's within His rights,' I said humbly. I paused, thinking back over the long irrational, bloody, wholly incomprehensible history of the human race. There was something I'd always felt, and this was a perfect chance to express it. The verdict was in, and the angel seemed to think

we should creep away utterly stricken. If there was any justice in this sentence, it eluded me.

'But what?' the angel demanded, crouching for his last takeoff. 'I charge thee speak, O Leonard J. ——'

'The Abdication,' I said boldly, looking him right in the eye. 'If you hadn't told us, we'd never even know the difference.'

He left without answering. I imagine there was nothing he could say.

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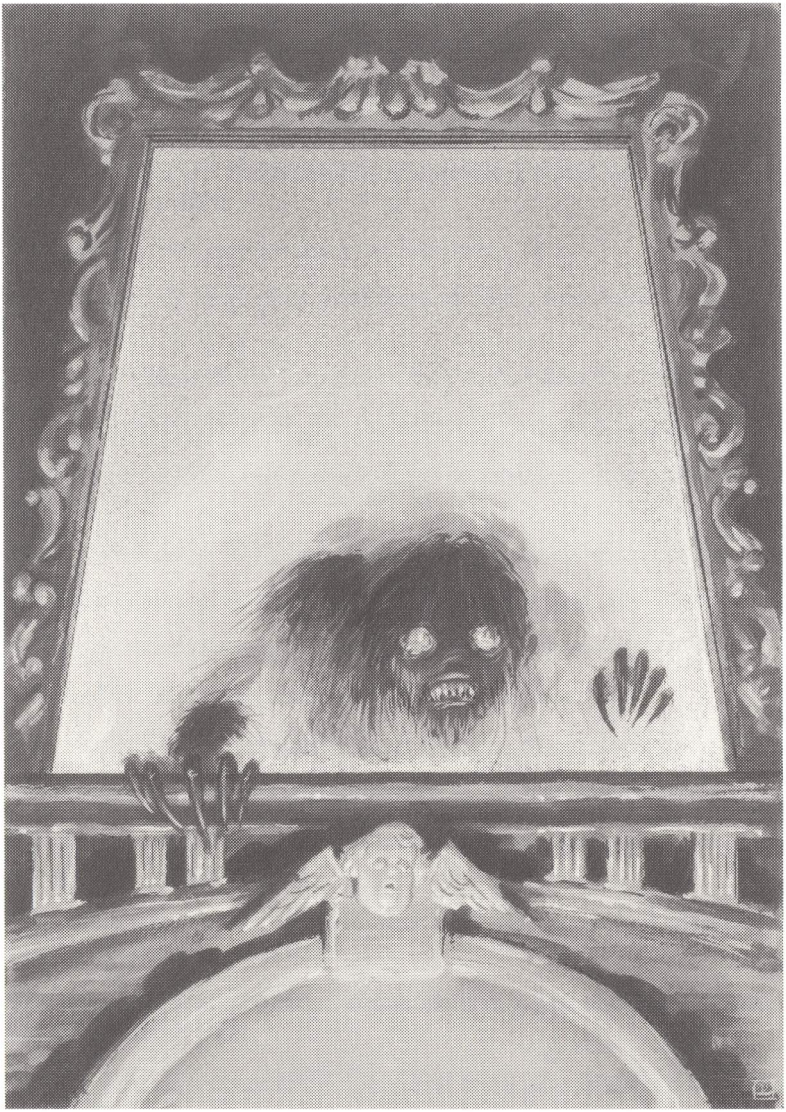

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